

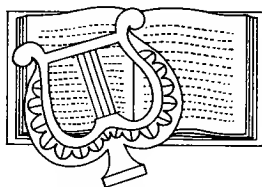
The New Rector



By Stanley H. Clegman

LONDON, SMITH, ELDER, & CO.

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Mabel Thurston
December 1896.

THE NEW RECTOR

WORKS BY STANLEY J. WEYMAN.

THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF.

THE NEW RECTOR.

THE STORY OF FRANCIS CLUDDE.

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.

THE MAN IN BLACK.

UNDER THE RED ROBE.

MY LADY ROTH.

THE RED COCKADE.

THE MEMOIRS OF A STATESMAN.

THE
NEW RECTOR

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF

'A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE' 'THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

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THE NEW RECTOR



CHAPTER I

‘LE ROI EST MORT!’

THE king was dead. But not at once, not until after some short breathing-space, such as was pleasant enough to those whose only concern with the succession lay in the shouting, could the cry of ‘Long live the king!’ be raised. For a few days there was no rector of Claversham. The living was during this time in abeyance, or in the clouds, or in the lap of the law, or in any strange and inscrutable place you choose to name. It may have been in the prescience of the patron, and, if so, no locality could be more vague, the whereabouts of Lord Dynmore himself, to say nothing of his prescience, being as uncertain as possible. Messrs. Gearn & Baker, his solicitors and agents, should have known as much about his movements as any one; yet it was their habit to tell one inquirer that his lordship was in the Cordilleras, and another that he was on the slopes of the Andes, and another that he was

at the forty-ninth parallel—quite indifferently; these places being all one to Messrs. Gearn & Baker, whose walk in life had lain for so many years about Lincoln's Inn Fields that Clare Market had come to be their ideal of an uncivilised country.

Moreover, if the whereabouts of Lord Dymore could only be told in words rather far-sounding than definite, there was room for a doubt whether his prescience existed at all. According to his friends, there never was a man whose memory was so notably eccentric—not weak, but eccentric. And if his memory was impeachable, his prescience might well be said—— But we grow wide of the mark. The question being merely where the living of Claversham was during the days which immediately followed Mr. Williams's death, let it be said at once that we do not know.

Mr. Williams was the late incumbent. He had been rector of the little Warwickshire town for nearly forty years; and although his people were ready enough to busy themselves with the question of his successor, he did not lack honour in his death. His had been a placid life, such as suited an indolent and easy-going man. 'Let me sit upon one chair and put up my feet on another, and there I am,' he had once been heard to say; and the town repeated the remark and chuckled over it. There were some who would have had the parish move more quickly, and who talked with a sneer of the old port-wine kind of parson. But these were few. If he had done little good, he had done less evil. He was kindly and open-handed, and he had

not an enemy in the parish. He was regretted as much as such a man should be. Besides, people did not die commonly in Claversham. It was but once a year, or twice at the most, that any one who was any one passed away. And so, when the event did occur, the most was made of it in an old-fashioned way. When Mr. Williams passed for the last time into his churchyard, there was no window which did not by shutter or blind mark its respect for him, not a tongue which wagged foul of his memory. And then the shutters were taken down and the blinds pulled up, and every one, from Mr. Clode, the curate, to the old people at Bourne’s Almshouses, who, having no affairs of their own, had the more time to discuss their neighbours’, asked, ‘Who is to be the new rector?’

On the day of the funeral two of these old pensioners watched the curate’s tall form as he came gravely along the opposite side of the street, and fell in at the door of his lodgings with two ladies, one elderly, one young, who were passing so opportunely that it really seemed as if they might have been waiting for him. He and the elder lady—she was so plump of figure, so healthy of eye and cheek, and was dressed besides with such a comfortable richness that it did one good to look at her—began to talk in a subdued, decorous fashion, while the girl listened. He was telling them of the funeral, how well the archdeacon had read the service, and what a crowd of Dissenters had been present, and so on; and at last he came to the important question.

‘I hear, Mrs. Hammond,’ he said, ‘that the

living will be given to Mr. Herbert, of Easthope, whom you know, I think? To me? Oh, no, I have not, and never had, any expectation of it. Please do not,' he added, with a slight smile and a shake of the head, 'mention such a thing again. Leave me in my content.'

'But why should you not have it?' replied the young lady, with a pleasant persistence. 'Every one in the parish would be glad if you were appointed. Could we not do something or say something—get up a petition or anything? Lord Dynmore ought, of course, to give it to you. I think some one should tell him what are the wishes of the parish. I do indeed, Mr. Clode.'

She was a very pretty young lady, with bright brown eyes and hair, and rather arch features; and the gentleman she was addressing had long found her face pleasant to look upon. But at this moment it really seemed to him as the face of an angel. Yet his answer betrayed only a kind of depressed gratitude. 'Thank you, Miss Hammond,' he said. 'If good wishes could procure me the living, I should have an excellent reason for hoping. But as things are, it is not for me.'

'Pooh! pooh!' said Mrs. Hammond cheerily, 'who knows?' And then, after a few more words, she and her daughter went on their way, and he turned into his rooms.

The old women were still watching. 'I don't well know who'll get it, Peggy,' said one, 'but I be pretty sure of this, as he won't! It isn't his sort as gets 'em. It's the lord's friends, bless you!'

So it appeared that she and Mr. Clode were of one mind on the matter. If that was really Mr. Clode's opinion. But it was when the crow opened its beak that it dropped the piece of cheese, it will be remembered; and so to this day the wise man has no chance or expectation of this or that—until he gets it. And if a patron or a patron's solicitor has for some days had under his paper-weight a letter written in a hand that bears a strange likeness to the wise man's—a letter setting forth the latter's claims and wisdom—what of that? That is a private matter, of course.

Be that as it may, there was scarcely a person in Claversham who did not give some time that evening, and on subsequent evenings too, to the interesting question who was to be the new rector. The rector was a big factor in the town life. Girls wondered whether he would be young, and hoped he would dance. Their mothers were sanguine that he would be unmarried, and their fathers that he would play whist. And one asked whether he would buy Mr. Williams's stock of port, and another whether he would dine late. And some trusted that he would let things be, and some hoped that he would cleanse the stables. And only one thing was certain and sure and immutably fixed—that, whoever he was, he would not be able to please everybody.

Nay, the ripple of excitement spread far beyond Claversham. Not only at the archdeacon's at Kingsford Carbonel, five miles away among the orchards and hopyards, was there much speculation

upon the matter; but even at the Homfrays', at Holberton, ten miles out beyond the Baer Hills, there was talk about it, and bets were made across the billiard-table. And in more distant vicarages and curacies, where the patron was in some degree known, there were flutterings of heart and anxious searchings of the 'Guardian' and Crockford. Those who seemed to have some chance of the living grew despondent, and those who had none talked the thing over with their wives after the children had gone to bed, until they persuaded themselves that they would die at Claversham Rectory. Middle-aged men who had been at college with Lord Dymore remembered that they had on one occasion rowed in the same boat with him; and young men who had danced with his niece thought secretly that, dear little woman as Emily or Annie was, they might have done better. And a hundred and eleven letters, written by people who knew less than Messrs. Gearn & Baker of the Andes, seeing that they did not know that Lord Dymore was there or thereabouts, were received at Dymore Park and forwarded to London, and duly made up into a large parcel with other correspondence by Messrs. Gearn & Baker, and so were despatched to the forty-ninth parallel—or thereabouts.

CHAPTER II

‘VIVE LE ROI!’

It was at the beginning of the second week in October that Mr. Williams died; and, the weather in those parts being peculiarly fine and bright for the time of year, men stood about in the churchyard with bare heads, and caught no colds. And it continued so for some days after the funeral. But not everywhere. Upon a morning, some three perhaps after the ceremony at Claversham, a young gentleman sat down to his breakfast, only a hundred and twenty miles away, under conditions so different—a bitter east wind, a dense fog, and a general murkiness of atmosphere—that one might have supposed his not over-plentiful meal to be laid in another planet.

The air in the room—a meagrely furnished, much littered room—was yellow and choking. The candles burned dimly in the midst of yellow halos. The fire seemed only to smoulder, and the owner of the room had to pay some attention to it before he sat down and found a letter lying beside his plate. He glanced at the envelope doubtfully. ‘I do not know the handwriting,’ he muttered. ‘It

is not a subscription, for subscriptions never come in an east wind. I am afraid it is a bill.'

The letter was addressed to the Rev. Reginald Lindo, St. Barnabas' Mission House, 383 East India Dock Road, London, E. After scrutinising it for a moment, he pulled a candle towards him and tore open the envelope.

He read the letter slowly, his tea-cup at his lips, and, though he was alone, his face grew crimson. When he had finished the note he turned back and read it again, and then flung it down and, starting up, began to walk the room. 'What a boy I am!' he muttered. 'But it is almost incredible. Upon my honour it is almost incredible!'

He was still at the height of his excitement, now sitting down to take a mouthful of breakfast and now leaping up to pace the room, when his housekeeper entered and said that a woman from Tamplin's Rents wanted to see him.

'What does she want, Mrs. Baxter?' he asked.

'Husband is dying, sir,' the old lady replied briefly.

'Do you know her at all?'

'No, sir. But she is as poor a piece as I have ever seen. She says that she could not have come out, for want of clothes, if it had not been for the fog. And they are not particular here, as I know, the hussies!'

'Say that I shall be ready to go with her in less than five minutes,' the young clergyman answered. 'And here! Give her some tea, Mrs. Baxter. The pot is half full.'

He bustled about ; but nevertheless the message and the business he was now upon had sobered him, and as he buttoned up the letter in his breast-pocket, his face was grave. He was a tall young man, fair, with regular features, and curling hair cut rather short. His eyes were blue and pleasantly bold ; and in his every action and in his whole carriage there was a great appearance of confidence and self-possession. Taking a book and a small case from a side-table, he put on his overcoat and went out. A moment, and the dense fog swallowed him up, and with him the tattered bundle of rags, which had a husband, and very likely had nothing else in the world.

Tamplin's Rents not affecting us, we may skip a few hours, and then go westward with him as far as the Temple, which in the East India Dock Road is considered very far west indeed by those who have ever heard of it. Here Lindo sought a dingy staircase in Fig-tree Court, and, mounting to the second floor, stopped before a door which was adorned by about a dozen names, painted in white on a black ground. He knocked loudly, and, a small boy answering his summons with great alacrity and importance, he asked for Mr. Smith, and was promptly ushered into a room about nine feet square, in which, at a table covered with papers and open books, sat a small dark-complexioned man, very keen and eager in appearance, who looked up with an air of annoyance.

'Who is it, Fred ?' he said impatiently, moving one of the candles, which the fog still rendered

necessary, although it was high noon. 'I am engaged at present.'

'Mr. Lindo to see you, sir,' the boy announced, with a formality funny enough in a groom of the chambers about four feet high.

The little man's countenance instantly changed, and he jumped up grinning. 'Is it you, old boy?' he said. 'Sit down, old fellow! I thought it might be my one solicitor, and it is well to be prepared, you know.'

'You are not really busy?' said the visitor, looking at him doubtfully.

'Well, I am and I am not,' replied Mr. Smith; and, deftly tipping aside the books, he disclosed some slips of manuscript. 'It is an article for the "Cornhill,"' he continued; 'but whether it will ever appear there is another matter. You have come to lunch, of course? And now, what is your news?'

He was so quick and eager that he reminded people who saw him for the first time of a rat. When they came to know him better, they found that a stauncher friend than Jack Smith was not to be found in the Temple. With this he had the reputation of being a clever, clear-headed man, and his sound common sense was almost a proverb. Observing that Lindo did not answer him, he continued, 'Is anything amiss, my boy?'

'Well, not quite amiss,' Lindo answered, his face flushing a little. 'But the fact is'—taking the letter from his breast-pocket—'that I have received the offer of a living, Jack.'

Smith leapt up and clapped his friend on the shoulder. ‘By Jove! old man,’ he exclaimed heartily, ‘I am glad of it! Very glad of it! You have had enough of that slumming. But I hope it is a better living than mine,’ he continued, with a comical glance round the tiny room. ‘Let us have a look! What is it? Two hundred and a house?’

Lindo handed the letter to him. It was written from Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and was dated the preceding day. It ran thus:

‘Dear Sir,—We are instructed by our client, the Right Honourable the Earl of Dynmore, to invite your acceptance of the living of Claversham in the county of Warwick, vacant by the death on the 15th instant of the Rev. John Williams, the late incumbent. The living, of which his lordship is the patron, is a town rectory, of the approximate value of 810*l.* per annum and a house. Our client is travelling in the United States, but we have the requisite authority to proceed in due form and without delay, which in this matter is prejudicial. We beg to have the pleasure of receiving your acceptance at as early a date as possible,

‘And remain, dear Sir,

‘Your obedient servants,

‘GEARNS & BAKER.

‘To the Rev. Reginald Lindo, M.A.’

The barrister read this letter with even greater surprise than the other expected, and, when he had done, looked at his companion with wondering

eyes, 'Claversham!' he ejaculated. 'Why, I know it well!'

'Do you? Well, I believe I have heard you mention it.'

'I knew old Williams!' Jack continued, still in amaze. 'Knew him well, and heard of his death, but little thought you were likely to succeed him. My dear fellow, it is a wonderful piece of good fortune! Wonderful! I shake you by the hand! I congratulate you heartily! But how did you come to know the high and mighty earl? Unbosom yourself, my dear boy!'

'I do not know him,' replied the young clergyman gravely.

'You do not know him?'

'No, I do not know him from Adam!'

'You don't mean it?'

'I do. I have never seen him in my life.'

Jack Smith whistled. 'Are you sure it is not a hoax?' he said, with a serious face, and in a different tone.

'I think not,' the rector elect replied. 'Perhaps I have given you a wrong impression. I have had nothing to do with the earl; but my uncle was his tutor.'

'Oh!' said Smith slowly, 'that makes all the difference. What uncle?'

'You have heard me speak of him. He was vicar of St. Gabriel's, Aldgate. He died about a year ago—last October, I think. Lord Dynmore and he were good friends, and my uncle used often to stay at his place in Scotland. I suppose my

name must have come up some time when they were talking.’

‘Likely enough,’ assented the lawyer. ‘But for the earl to remember it, he must be one in a hundred!’

‘It is certainly very good of him,’ Lindo replied, his cheek flushing. ‘If it had been a small country living, and my uncle had been alive to jog his elbow, I should not have been so much surprised.’

‘And you are just twenty-five!’ Jack Smith observed, leaning back in his chair, and eyeing his friend with undisguised and whimsical admiration. ‘You will be the youngest rector in the Clergy List, I should think! And Claversham! By Jove, what a berth!’

A queer expression of annoyance for a moment showed itself in Lindo’s face. ‘I say, Jack, stow that!’ he said gently, and with a little shamefacedness. ‘I mean,’ he continued, looking down and smoothing the nap on his hat, ‘that I do not want to regard it altogether in that way, and I do not want others to regard it so.’

‘As a berth, you mean?’ Jack said gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes.

‘Well, from the loaves and fishes point of view,’ Lindo answered, beginning to walk up and down the room in some excitement. ‘I do not think an officer, when he gets promotion, looks only at the increase in his pay. Of course I am glad that it is a good living, and that I shall have a house, and a tolerable position, and all that. But I declare to

you, Jack, believe me or not as you like, that if I did not feel that I could do the work as I hope, please Heaven, to do it, I would not take it up—I would not, indeed. As it is, I feel the responsibility. I have been thinking about it as I walked down here, and upon my honour for a while I thought I ought to decline it.’

‘I would not do that!’ said Gallio, dismissing the twinkle from his eyes, and really respecting his old friend, perhaps, a little more than before. ‘You are not the man, I think, to shun either work or responsibility. Did I tell you,’ he continued in a different tone, ‘that I had an uncle at Claversham?’

‘No,’ said Lindo.

‘Yes, and I think he is one of your churchwardens. His name is Bonamy, and he is a solicitor. His London agent is my only client,’ Jack said jerkily.

‘And he is one of the churchwardens! Well, that is strange—and jolly!’

‘Umph! Don’t you be too sure of that!’ retorted the barrister sharply. ‘He is a—well, he has been very good to me, and he is my uncle, and I am not going to say anything against him. But I am not quite sure that I should like him for my churchwarden. *Your* churchwarden! Why, it is like a fairy tale, old fellow!’

And so it seemed to Lindo when, an hour later, the small boy, with the same portentous gravity of face, let him out and bade him good-day. As the young parson started eastwards, along Fleet Street

first, he looked at the moving things round him with new eyes, from a new standpoint, with a new curiosity. The passers-by were the same, but he was changed. He had lunched, and perhaps the material view of his position was uppermost, for those in the crowd who particularly observed the tall young clergyman noticed in his bearing an air of calm importance and a strong sense of personal dignity, which led him to shun collisions, and even to avoid jostling his fellows, with peculiar care. In truth he had all the while before his eyes, as he walked, an announcement which was destined to appear in the ‘Guardian’ of the following week :

‘The Rev. Reginald Lindo, M.A., St. Barnabas’ Mission, London, to be Rector of Claversham. Patron, the Earl of Dynmore.’

CHAPTER III

AN AWKWARD MEETING

A FORTNIGHT after this paragraph in the 'Guardian' had filled Claversham with astonishment and Mr. Clode with a modest thankfulness that he was spared the burden of office, a little dark man—Jack Smith, in fact—drove briskly into Paddington Station. He disregarded the offers of the porters, who stand waiting on the hither side of the journey like Charon by the Styx, and see at a glance who has the obolus, and, springing from his hansom without assistance, bustled on to the platform.

Here he looked up and down as if he expected to meet some one, and then, glancing at the clock, found that he had a quarter of an hour to spare. He made at once for the bookstall, and, with a lavishness which would have surprised some of his friends, bought 'Punch,' a little volume by Howells, the 'Standard,' and finally, though he blushed as he asked for it, the 'Queen.' He had just gathered his purchases together and was paying for them, when a high-pitched voice at his elbow made him start. 'Why, Jack! what in the world are you buying all those papers for?' it said. The speaker

was a girl about thirteen years old, who in the hubbub had stolen unnoticed to his side.

‘Hullo, Daintry!’ he answered. ‘Why did you not say before that you were here? I have been looking for you. Where is Kate? Oh, yes, I see her,’ he added, as a young lady turning over books at the farther end of the stall acknowledged his presence by a laughing nod. ‘You are here in good time,’ he went on to the younger girl, who affectionately slipped her arm through his.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Your mother started us early. And so you have come to see us off, after all, Jack?’

‘Just so,’ he answered dryly. ‘Let us go to Kate.’

They did so, the young lady meeting them half-way. ‘How kind of you to be here, Jack!’ she said. ‘As you have come, will you look us out a comfortable compartment? That is the train over there. And please to put this and this and Daintry’s parcel in the corners for us.’

This and this were a cloak and a shawl, and a few little matters in brown paper. In order to possess himself of them, Jack handed Kate the papers he was carrying.

‘Are they for me?’ she said, gratefully indeed, but with a placid gratitude which was not perhaps what the donor wanted. ‘Oh, thank you. And this too? What is it?’

“‘Their Wedding Journey,’” said Jack, with a tiny twinkle in his eyes.

‘Is it pretty?’ she answered dubiously. ‘It sounds silly; but you are supposed to be a judge.

I think I should like "A Chance Acquaintance" better, though.'

Of course the little book was changed, and Jack winced. But he had not time to think much about it, for he had to bustle away through the rising babel to secure seats for them in an empty compartment of the Oxford train, and see their luggage labelled and put in. This done, he hurried back, and, bringing them to the spot, pointed out the places he had taken. But Kate stopped short. 'Oh, dear, they are in a through carriage,' she said, eyeing the board over the door.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I thought that was what you wanted.'

'No, I would rather go in another carriage and change. We shall get to Claversham soon enough without travelling with Claversham people.'

'Indeed we shall,' Daintry chimed in imperiously. 'Let us go and find seats, and Jack will bring the things after us.'

He assented meekly—very meekly for sharp Jack Smith—and presently came along with his arms full of parcels, to find his friends ensconced in the nearer seats of a compartment which contained one other passenger, a gentleman who was already deep in the 'Times.' Jack, standing at the open door, could not see his face, for it was hidden by the newspaper, but he could see that his legs wore a youthful and reckless air; and he raised his eyebrows interrogatively. 'Pooh!' Daintry whispered in answer. 'How stupid you are! It is all right. I can see he is a clergyman by his boots!'

Jack smiled at this assurance, and, putting in the things he was holding, shut the door and stood outside, looking from the platform about him, on which all was flurry and confusion, to the interior of the carriage, which seemed in comparison peaceful and homelike. 'I think I will come with you to Westbourne Park,' he said suddenly.

'Nonsense, Jack!' Kate replied, with crushing decision. 'We shall be there in five minutes, and you will have all the trouble of returning for nothing.'

He acquiesced meekly—very meekly for Jack Smith. 'Well,' he said, with a new effort at cheerfulness, 'you will soon be at home, girls. Remember me to the governor. I am afraid you will be rather dull at first. You will have one scrap of excitement, however.'

'What is that?' said Kate, very much as if she were prepared to depreciate it before she heard what it was.

'The new rector, of course!'

'He will make very little difference to us!' the girl answered, with an accent of indifference which amounted almost to scorn. 'Papa said in his letter that he thought it was a great pity a local man had not been appointed—some one who knew the place and the old ways. Of course, knowing him, you say he is clever and nice; but either way it will not affect us much.'

No one remarked that the 'Times' newspaper in the far corner of the compartment rustled suspiciously, or that the clerical boots became agitated

on a sudden, as though their wearer meditated a move ; and, in ignorance of this, ' I expect I shall hate him ! ' Daintry said calmly.

' Come, you must not do that,' Jack remonstrated. ' You must remember that he is not only a very good fellow, but a great friend of mine, Daintry.'

' Then we ought indeed to spare him ! ' Kate said frankly, ' for you have been very good to us and made our visit delightful.'

His face flushed with pleasure even at those simple words of praise. ' You will write and tell me,' he continued eagerly, ' that you have reached your journey's end safely ? '

' One of us will,' was the answer. ' Daintry,' Kate went on calmly, ' will you remind me to write to Jack to-morrow evening ? '

His face fell sadly. So little would have made him happy. He looked down and kicked the step of the carriage, and made a little moan to himself before he spoke again. ' Good-bye,' he said then. ' They are coming to look at your tickets. You should leave in one minute. Good-bye, Daintry.'

' Good-bye, Jack. Come and see us soon,' she cried earnestly, as she released his hand.

' Good-bye, Kate.' Alas ! Kate's cheek did not show the slightest consciousness that his clasp was more than cousinly. She uttered her ' Good-bye, Jack, and thank you so much,' very kindly, but her colour never varied by the quarter of a tone, and her grasp was as firm and as devoid of shyness as his own.

He had not much time to be miserable, however, for, the ticket-collector coming to the window, he had to fall back, and in doing so made a discovery. Kate, hunting for her ticket in one of those mysterious places in which ladies will put tickets, heard him utter an exclamation, and looking up asked, 'What is it, Jack?'

He did not answer, but, to her surprise, the collector having by this time disappeared, he stretched his hand through the window to some one beyond her. 'Why, Lindo!' he cried, 'is that you? I had not a notion of your identity. Of course you are going down to take possession.'

Kate, trembling already with a horrible presentiment, turned her head quickly. Her fears were well-grounded. It was the clergyman in the corner who answered Jack's greeting and rose to shake hands with him, the train being already in motion. 'I did not recognise your voice out there,' the stranger said, his cheek hot, his manner constrained.

'No? And I did not know you were going down to-day,' Jack answered, walking beside the train. 'Let me introduce you to my cousins, Miss Bonamy and Daintry. I am sorry that I did not see you before. Good luck to you! Good-bye, Kate; good-bye!'

The train was moving faster and faster, and Jack was soon left behind on the platform, gazing pathetically at the black tunnel which had swallowed it up. In the carriage there was silence, and in the heart of one at least of the passengers the most horrible vexation. Kate could have bitten out her

tongue. She was conscious that the clergyman had bowed in acknowledgment of Jack's introduction and had muttered something. But after that he had sunk back in his corner, his face wearing, as it seemed to her, a frown of scornful annoyance. Even if nothing awkward had been said, she would still have shunned for a reason best known to herself such a meeting as this with a new clergyman who did not yet know Claversham. But now she had aggravated the matter by her heedlessness. She had made a hopeless *faux pas*, and she sat angry, and yet ashamed, with her lips pressed together and her eyes fixed upon the opposite cushion.

For the Rev. Reginald, he was by no means indifferent to the criticisms he had unfortunately overheard. Always possessed of a fairly good opinion of himself, he had lately been raising his standard to the rectorial height; and, being very human, he had come to think himself something of a personage. If Jack Smith had introduced him to his maiden aunt under circumstances as unlucky, there is no saying how far the acquaintance would have progressed, or how long the new incumbent might have fretted and fumed. But presently he stole a look at Kate Bonamy and melted.

He saw a girl slightly above the middle height, graceful and rounded of figure, with a grave stateliness of carriage which oddly became her. Her complexion was rather pale, but it was clear and healthy, and there was even a freckle here and a freckle there, which I never heard a man say that he would have had elsewhere. If her face was a trifle

long, the nose a little aquiline, the curving lips too wide, yet it was a fair and dainty face, such as Englishmen love. The brown hair, which strayed on to the broad white brow and hung in a heavy loop upon her neck, had a natural waviness—the sole beauty on which she prided herself. For she could not see her eyes as others saw them—big grey eyes that from under long lashes looked out at you, full of such purity and truth that men meeting their gaze straightway felt a desire to be better men, and went away and tried—for half an hour. Such was Kate outwardly. Inwardly she had faults of course, and perhaps pride and a little temper were two of them.

The rector was still admiring her askance, surprised to find that Jack Smith, who was not very handsome himself, had such a cousin, when Daintry roused him abruptly. For some moments she had been gazing at him, as at some unknown specimen—with no attempt to hide her interest. Now she said suddenly, ‘You are the new rector?’

He answered stiffly that he was; being a good deal taken aback at being challenged in that way. Remonstrance, however, was out of the question, and Daintry for the moment said no more, though her gaze, as she sat curled up in her corner of the carriage, lost none of its embarrassing directness.

But presently she began again. ‘I should think the dogs would like you,’ she said deliberately, and much as if he had not been there to hear; ‘you look as if they would.’

Silence again. The rector, gazing at the opposite cushions, smiled fatuously. What was a bene-

ficed clergyman, whose dignity was young and tender, to do, subjected to the criticism of unknown dogs? He tried to divert his thoughts by considering the pretty sage-green frock and the grey fur cape and hat to match which the elder girl was wearing. Doubtless she was taking the latest fashions down to Claversham, and fur capes and hats, indefinitely and mysteriously multiplying, would listen to him on Sundays from all the nearest pews. And Daintry was silent so long that he thought he had done with her. But no. 'Do you think that you will like Claversham?' she asked, with an air of serious curiosity.

'I trust I shall,' he said, a flush rising to his cheek.

She took a moment to consider the answer conscientiously, and, thinking badly of it, remarked gravely, 'I don't think you will.'

This was unbearable. The clergyman, full of a nervous dread lest the next question should be, 'Do you think that they will like you at Claversham?' made a great show of resuming his newspaper. Kate, possessed by the same fear, shot an imploring glance at Daintry; but, seeing that the latter had only eyes for the stranger, hoped desperately for the best.

Which was very bad. 'It must be jolly, do you know, remarked the unconscious tormentor, 'to have eight hundred pounds a year, and be a rector!'

'Daintry!' Kate cried in horror.

'Why, what is the matter?' Daintry asked,

turning suddenly to her sister with wide-open eyes.

Her look of aggrieved astonishment overcame Lindo's gravity, and he laughed aloud. He was not without a charming sense, still novel enough to be pleasing, that Daintry was right. It was jolly to be a rector and have eight hundred pounds a year!

The laugh came in happily. It swept away the cobwebs of embarrassment which had lain so thickly about two of the party. Lindo, ignoring what had gone before, began to talk pleasantly, pointing out this or that reach of the river; and Kate, meeting his cheery eyes, put aside a faint idea of apologising which had been in her head, and replied frankly. He told them tales of summer voyages between lock and lock, of long days idly spent in the Wargrave marshes; and, as the identification of Mapledurham and Pangbourne and Wittenham and Goring rendered it necessary that they should all cross and recross the carriage, they were soon on excellent terms with one another, or would have been if the rector had not still detected in Kate's manner a slight stiffness for which he could not account. It puzzled him also to observe that, though they were ready, Daintry more particularly, to discuss the amusements of London and the goodness of Cousin Jack, they both grew reticent when the conversation turned towards Claversham and its affairs.

At Oxford he stepped out to go to the bookstall. 'Jack was right,' said Daintry, looking after him. 'He is nice.'

‘Yes,’ her sister allowed, rising and sitting down again in a restless fashion. ‘But I wish we had not fallen in with him, all the same.’

‘It cannot be helped now,’ said Daintry, who was evidently prepared to accept the event with philosophy.

Not so the elder girl. ‘We might go into another carriage,’ she suggested.

‘That would be rude,’ said Daintry calmly.

The question was decided for them by the young clergyman’s return. He came along the platform, an animated look in his eyes. ‘Miss Bonamy,’ he said, stopping at the open door with his hand extended, ‘there is someone in the refreshment-room whom I think that you would like to see. Mr. Gladstone is there, talking to the Duke of Westminster, and they are both eating buns like common mortals. Will you come and take a peep at them?’

‘I don’t think that we have time,’ she objected.

‘There is sure to be time,’ Daintry cried. ‘Now, Kate, come!’ And she was down upon the platform in a moment.

‘The train is not due out for five minutes yet,’ Lindo said, as he piloted them through the crowd to the doorway. ‘There, on the left by the fire-place,’ he added.

Kate glanced, and turned away satisfied. Not so Daintry. With rapt attention in her face she strayed nearer and nearer to the great men, her eyes growing larger with each step.

‘She will be speaking to them next,’ said Kate, in a fidget.

‘Perhaps asking Mr. Gladstone if he likes Downing Street,’ Lindo suggested slyly. ‘There, she is coming now,’ he added, as Miss Daintry turned and came to them at last.

‘I wanted to make sure,’ she said simply, seeing Kate’s impatience, ‘that I should know them again. That was all.’

‘Quite so, and I hope you have succeeded,’ Kate answered dryly. ‘But, if we are not quick, we shall miss our train.’ And she led the way back with more speed than dignity.

‘There is plenty of time—plenty of time,’ Lindo answered, following them. He could not bear to see her pushing her way through the mixed crowd, and accepting so easily a footing of equality with it. He was one of those men to whom their womenkind are sacred. He took his time, therefore, and followed at his ease; only to see, when he emerged from the press, a long stretch of empty platform, three porters, and the tail of a departing train. ‘Good gracious!’ he stammered, halting suddenly, with dismay in his face. ‘What does this mean?’

‘It means,’ Kate answered, in an accent of sharp annoyance—she did not intend to spare him—‘that you have made us miss our train, Mr. Lindo. And there is not another which reaches Claversham to-day!’

CHAPTER IV

BIRDS IN THE WILDERNESS

‘WELL, there now! Whose fault was that?’ said Daintry, turning from the departing train.

The young rector could not deny it was his. He would have given anything for at least the appearance of being undisturbed; but the blood rose to his cheek, and in his attempt to maintain his dignity he only succeeded in looking angry as well as confused and taken aback. He had certainly made a mess of his escort duty. What in the world had led him to go out of his way to make a fool of himself? he wondered. And with these Claversham people!

‘There may be a special train to-day,’ Kate suggested suddenly. She had got over her first vexation, and perhaps repented that she had betrayed it so openly. ‘Or we may be allowed to go on by a luggage train, Mr. Lindo. Will you kindly see?’ He snatched at the relief which her proposal held out to him, and strode away to inquire. But almost at once he was back again. ‘It is most vexatious!’ he said, with loud indignation. ‘It is only three o’clock, and yet there is no way of

getting to Claversham to-night! I am very sorry, but I never dreamed the company managed things so badly. Never!’

‘No,’ said Kate dryly.

He winced and looked at her sharply, his vanity hurt again. But then he found that he could not keep it up. No doubt it was a ridiculous position for a beneficed clergyman, on his way to undertake the work of his life—to be delayed at a station with two girls; but, after all, for a young man to be angry with a young woman who is also pretty—well, the task is difficult. ‘I am afraid,’ he said, looking at her shyly, and yet with a kind of frankness, ‘that I have brought you into trouble, Miss Bonamy. As your sister says, it was my fault. Is it a matter of great consequence that you should reach home to-night?’

‘I am afraid that my father will be vexed,’ she answered.

‘You must telegraph to him,’ he rejoined. ‘I am afraid that is all I can suggest. And that done, you will have only one thing to consider—whether we shall stay the night here or go on to Birmingham and stay there.’

Kate looked at him, her grey eyes full of trouble, and did not at once answer. He had clearly made up his mind to join his fortunes to theirs, while she, on her side, had private reasons for shrinking from intimacy with him. But he seemed to consider it so much a matter of course that they should remain together and travel together, that she scarcely saw how to put things on a different footing. She knew,

too, that she would get no help from Daintry, who already regarded their detention in the light of a capital joke.

‘What are you going to do yourself, Mr Lindo?’ she said at last, her manner rather chilling.

He opened his eyes and smiled. ‘You discard me, then?’ he said. ‘You have lost all faith in me, Miss Bonamy, and will go no farther with me? Well, I deserve it after the scrape into which I have led you.’

‘I did not mean that,’ she answered. ‘I wished to know if you had formed any plans.’

‘Yes,’ he replied—‘a plan to make amends, if you will let me take command of the party. We will stay in Oxford, and I will show you round the colleges.’

‘No,’ exclaimed Daintry. ‘Will you? How jolly! And then?’

‘We will dine at the Mitre,’ he answered, smiling, ‘if Miss Bonamy will permit me to manage everything. And then, if you leave here at nine-thirty to-morrow you will be at Claversham soon after twelve. Will that suit you?’

Daintry’s face answered sufficiently for her. As for Kate, she was in a difficulty. She knew little of hotels: yet they must stop somewhere, and no doubt Mr. Lindo would take a great deal of trouble off her hands. But would it be proper to do as he proposed? She really did not know—only that it sounded odd. That it would not be wise she knew. She could answer that question at once. But how could she explain, and how tell

him to go his way and leave them? And, after all, to see Oxford would be delightful; and he really was very pleasant, very different from the men she knew at home. 'You are very good,' she said at length, with a grateful sigh—'if we have no choice but between Oxford and Birmingham.'

'And no choice of guides at all,' he said, smiling, 'you will take me.'

'Yes,' she answered, looking away rather primly.

Her reserve, however, did not last. Once through the station gates, that free holiday feeling which we have all experienced on being set down in an unknown town, with no duty before us save to explore it, soon possessed her; while he wished nothing better than to play the showman—a part we love. The day was fine and bright, though cold. She had eyes for beauty and a soul for the past, and soon forgot herself; and he, piloting the sisters through Magdalen Walks, now strewn with leaves, or displaying with pride the staircase of Christchurch, the quaint library of Merton, or the ancient front of John's, forgot himself also, and especially his new-born dignity, in which he had lived rather too much, perhaps, during the last three weeks. He showed himself in his true colours—the colours known to his intimate friends—and grew so bright and cheery that Kate found herself talking to him in utter forgetfulness of his position and theirs. The girl sighed frankly when darkness fell and they had to go into the house, their curiosity still unsated.

She thought it was all over. But no, there was

a cheery fire awaiting them in the 'House' room (he had looked in for a few minutes on their arrival and given his orders); and before it a little table laid for three was sparkling with plate and glass. Nay, there were two cups of tea ready on a side-table, for it wanted an hour yet of dinner-time. Altogether, as Daintry naively told him, 'even Jack could not have made it nicer for us.'

'Jack is a favourite of yours?' he said, laughing.

'I should think so!' Daintry answered, in wonder. 'There is no one like Jack.'

'After that I shall take myself off,' he replied. 'Seriously, I want to call on a friend, Miss Bonamy. But if I may join you at dinner——'

'Oh, do!' she said impulsively. Then, more shyly, she added, 'We shall be very glad if you will, I am sure.'

He felt singularly light-hearted and pleased with himself as he turned the windy corner of the Broad. It was pleasant to be in Oxford again, a beneficed clergyman. Pleasant to have such a future to look forward to, such a holiday moment to enjoy. Pleasant to anticipate the cheery meal and the girl's smile, half shy, half grateful. And Kate? She remained before the fire, saying little because Daintry's tongue gave few openings, but thinking a good deal. Once she did speak. 'It won't last,' she said pettishly.

'Why, Kate?' Daintry protested. 'Do you think he will be different at Claversham?'

'Of course he will!' She spoke with a little

scorn in her voice, and that sort of decision which we use when we wish to crush down our own unwarranted hopes.

‘But he is nice,’ Daintry persisted. ‘You do think so, Kate, don’t you?’

‘Oh, yes, he is very nice,’ she said dryly. ‘But he will be in the Hammond set at home, and we shall see nothing of him.’

But presently he was back, and then Kate found it impossible to resist the charm. He ladled the soup and dispensed the mutton chops with a gaiety and boyish glee which were really the stored-up effervescence of weeks, the ebullition of the long-repressed delight which he took in his promotion. He learned casually that the girls had been in London for more than a month, staying with Jack’s mother in Bayswater, and that they were by no means well pleased to be upon their road home.

‘And yet,’ he said—this was towards the end of dinner—‘I have been told that your town is a very picturesque one. I fancy that we never appreciate our home as we do a place strange to us.’

‘Very likely that is so,’ Kate answered quietly. And then a little pause ensued, such as he had observed several times before, and come to connect with any mention of Claversham. The girls’ tongues would run on frankly and pleasantly enough about their London visit, or Mr. Gladstone; but let him bring the talk round to his parish and its people, and forthwith something of reserve seemed to come between him and them until the conversation strayed afield again.

After the others had finished he still toyed with his meal, partly in lazy enjoyment of the time, partly as an excuse for staying with them. They were sitting in a momentary silence, when a boy passed the window chanting a ditty at the top of his voice. The doggerel came clearly to their ears—

Here we sit like birds in the wilderness,
Birds in the wilderness, birds in the wilderness;
Here we sit like birds in the wilderness,
Samuel asking for more.

As the sound passed on the young man looked up, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, and met their eyes, and all three burst into a merry peal of laughter. They were the birds in the wilderness, sitting there in the little circle of light, in the strange room in the strange town, almost as intimate as if they had known one another for years, or had been a week at sea together.

But Kate, having acknowledged by that pleasant outburst her sense of the oddity of the position, rose from the table; and the rector had to say good-night, explaining at the same time that he should not travel with them next morning, but intended to go on by a later train, as his friend wished to see more of him. Nevertheless, he said he should be up to breakfast with them and should see them off. And in this resolution he persisted, notwithstanding Kate's protest, which perhaps was not very violent.

Nevertheless, he was a little late next morning, and when he came down he found them already

seated in the coffee-room. There were others breakfasting here and there in the room, chiefly upon toast-racks and newspapers, and he did not at once observe that the gentleman standing with his back set negligently against the mantelshelf was talking to Kate. Arrived at the table, however, he saw that it was so; and the cheery greeting on his lips faded into a commonplace 'Good morning, Miss Bonamy.' He took no apparent notice of the stranger as he added, 'I am afraid I am rather late.'

The intruder, a short dark-whiskered man between thirty and forty, seemed to the full as much surprised by the clergyman's appearance as Lindo was by his; and, moreover, to be as little able to hide the feeling as Kate herself to control the colour which rose in her cheeks. She gave Mr. Lindo his tea in silence, and then with an obvious effort introduced the two men. 'This is Dr. Gregg of Claversham—Mr. Lindo,' she said.

Lindo rose and shook hands.

'Mr. Lindo the younger, I presume?' said the doctor, with a bow and a careless gesture intended to show that he was quite at his ease.

'The only one, I am afraid,' replied the rector, smiling. Though he by no means liked the look of his new friend.

'Did I rightly catch your name?' was the answer—"Mr. Lindo?"'

'Yes,' said the rector again, opening his eyes in some surprise.

'But you are not—you do not mean to say

that you are the new rector ? ' pronounced the dark man abruptly, and with a kind of aggressiveness which seemed his most striking quality—' the rector of Claversham, I mean ? '

' I believe so,' said Lindo quietly. ' You want some more water, do you not, Miss Bonamy ? ' he continued. ' Let me ring the bell.'

He rose and crossed the room to do so. The truth was, he hated the newcomer already. The man's first sentence had been enough. His manner was not the manner of the men with whom Lindo had mixed, and the rector felt almost angry with Kate for introducing Gregg—albeit his parishioner—to him, and quite angry with her for suffering the doctor to address her with the familiarity he seemed to affect.

And Kate, her eyes cast down, knew by instinct how it was with him, and what he was thinking. ' I have been telling Dr. Gregg,' she said hurriedly, when he returned, ' how we missed our train yesterday.'

' Rather how I missed it for you,' Lindo answered gravely, devoting himself to his breakfast.

' Ah, yes, it was very funny ! ' the doctor fired off, watching each mouthful they ate. Daintry had finished, and was sitting back in her chair kicking the leg of the table monotonously ; not in the best of tempers apparently. ' Very funny indeed ! ' the doctor continued. ' An accident, I hope ? ' with a little sniggling laugh.

' Yes ! ' said the rector, looking up at him with a black brow and steadfast eyes—' it was an accident.'

Gregg was a little cowed by the look, and in another minute, with a muttered word or two, fidgeted himself away, cursing the general superciliousness of parsons and the quiet airs of this one in particular. He was a little dog-in-the-mangerish man, ill-bred, and like most ill-bred men, resentful of breeding in others. The fact that he had a sneaking liking for Kate did not tend to lessen his disgustful wonder how the Bonamy girls and the new rector came to be travelling together—which, indeed, to any Claversham person would have seemed a portent. But, then, Lindo did not know that.

The objectionable item removed, and the temptation to remark upon him overcome, Lindo soon recovered his good temper, and rattled away so pleasantly that the train time seemed to all of them to come very quickly.

‘There,’ he said, as he handed the last of Kate’s books into the railway carriage, ‘now I have done something to make amends for my fault, I trust. One thing more I can do. When you get home you need not spare me. You can put it all on my shoulders, Miss Bonamy.’

‘Thank you,’ Kate answered demurely.

‘You are going to do so, I see,’ he said, laughing. ‘I fear my character will reach Claversham before me.’

‘I do not think we shall spread it very widely,’ she answered in a peculiar tone; which he naturally misunderstood.

He had not time to weigh it, indeed, for the

train was already in motion, and he shook hands with her as he walked beside it. 'Good-bye,' he said. And then he added in a lower tone—he was such a very young rector—'I hope to see very much of you in the future, Miss Bonamy.'

Kate sank back in her seat, her cheek a shade warmer. And in a moment he was alone upon the platform.

CHAPTER V

‘REGINALD LINDO, 1850’

LONG before the later train, by which the rector came on, arrived at the Claversham station, the Rev. Stephen Clode was waiting on the platform. The curate—we have seen him once before—was a tall dark man, somewhat over thirty, with a strong rugged face and a bush of stiff black hair standing up from his forehead. He had been at Claversham three years, enjoying all the importance which old Mr. Williams’s long illness would naturally give to his curate and *locum tenens*; and, though the town was agreed that his chagrin at having a new rector set over his head was great, it must be admitted that he concealed it with admirable skill. More than one letter had passed between him and the new incumbent, and, in securing for the latter Mr. Williams’s good old-fashioned furniture, and in other ways, he had made himself very useful to Lindo. But the two had not met, and consequently the curate viewed the approaching train with lively, though secret, curiosity.

It came, the bell rang, the porter cried, ‘Claver-

sham! Claversham!’ and the curate walked down it, past the carriage-windows, looking for the man he had come to meet. Half a dozen people stepped out, and for a moment there was a mimic tumult on the little platform: but nowhere amid it all could Clode see any one like the new rector. ‘He has missed another train!’ he muttered to himself in contemptuous wonder; and he was already casting a last look round him before turning on his heel, when a tall, fair young man, in a clerical overcoat, who had been one of the first to alight, stepped up to him. ‘Am I speaking to Mr. Clode?’ said the stranger pleasantly. And he lifted his hat.

‘Certainly,’ the curate answered. ‘I am Mr. Clode. But I fear I have not the——’

‘No, I know,’ replied the other, smiling, and at the same time holding out his hand. ‘Though, indeed, I hoped that you might have been here on purpose to meet me. My name is Lindo.’

The curate uttered an exclamation of surprise; and, hastily returning the proffered grip, fixed his black eyes curiously on his new friend. ‘Mr. Lindo did not mention that you were with him,’ he answered in a tone of some embarrassment. ‘But, there, let me see to your luggage. Is it all here?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ Lindo answered, tapping one article after another with his umbrella, and giving the station-master a pleasant ‘Good day!’ ‘Is there an omnibus or anything?’

‘Yes,’ Clode said; ‘it will be all right. They know where to take it. You will walk up with me,

perhaps. It is about a quarter of a mile to the rectory.'

The newcomer assented gladly, and the two passed out of the station together. Lindo let his eye travel up the wide, steep street before him, until it rested on the noble tower which crowned the little hill and looked down now, as it had looked down for five centuries, on the red roofs clustering about it. His tower! his church! Even his companion did not remark, so slight was the action, that, as he passed out of the station and looked up, he lifted his hat for a second.

'And where is your father?' Clode asked. 'Was he delayed by business? Or perhaps,' he added, dubiously scanning him, 'you are Mr. Lindo's brother?'

'*I am* Mr. Lindo!' said our friend, turning in astonishment and looking at his companion.

'The rector?'

'Yes.'

It was the curate's turn to stare now, and he did so—his face flushing darkly and his eyes wide open for once. He even seemed for a moment to be stricken dumb with surprise and emotion. 'Indeed!' he said at last, in a half-stifled voice which he vainly strove to render natural. Indeed! I beg your pardon. I had thought—I don't know why—I mean that I had expected to see an older man.'

'I am sorry you are disappointed,' the rector replied, smiling ruefully. 'I am beginning to think I am rather young, for you are not the first to-day who has made that mistake.'

The curate did not answer, and the two walked on in silence, feeling somewhat awkward. Clode, indeed, was raging inwardly. By one thing and another he had been led to expect a man past middle life, and the only Clergy List in the parish, being three years old and containing the name of Lindo's uncle only, had confirmed him in the error. He had never conceived the idea that the man set over his head would be a fledgeling scarcely a year in priest's orders, or he would have gone elsewhere. He would never have stayed to be at the beck and call of such a puppy as this! He felt that he had been entrapped, and he chafed inwardly to such an extent that he did not dare to speak. To have this young fellow, six or seven years his junior, set over him would humiliate him in the eyes of all those before whom he had long played a different part!

In a minor degree Lindo also was vexed—not only because he was sufficiently sensitive to enter into the other's feelings, but also because he foresaw trouble ahead. It was annoying, too, to be received at each new *rencontre* as a surprise—as the reverse of all that had been expected and all that had been, as he feared, hoped.

'You will find the rectory a very comfortable house,' said the curate at last, his mind fully made up now that he would leave at the earliest possible date. 'Warm and old-fashioned. Rough-cast outside. Many of the rooms are panelled.'

'It looks out on the churchyard, I believe,' replied the rector, with the same laboured politeness.

'Yes, it stands high. The view from the

windows at the back is pleasant. The front is perhaps a little gloomy—in winter at least.'

Near the top of the street a quaint, narrow flight of steps conducted them to the churchyard—an airy, elevated place, surrounded on three sides by the church and houses, but open on the fourth, on which a terraced walk, running along the summit of the old town wall, admitted the southern sun and afforded a wide view of plain and hill. The two men crossed the churchyard, the new rector looking about him with curiosity and a little awe, his companion marching straight onwards, his strongly-marked face set ominously. He would go ! He would go at the earliest possible minute, he was thinking.

It did not affect him nor alter his resolution that in the wooden porch of the old rectory the new rector turned to him and shyly, yet with real feeling, besought his help and advice in the work before him. The young clergyman, commonly so self-confident, was moved, and moved deeply, by the evening light, by the dark forms of the yew-trees, and his own strange and solemn position. Stephen Clode's answer was in the affirmative—it could hardly have been other ; and it was spoken becomingly, if a little coldly. But, even while he uttered it, he was considering how he might best escape from Claversham. Nevertheless, his Yea, yea, comforted his companion and lightened his momentary apprehensions.

Nor was the curate, when he had recovered from the first shock of surprise and disgust, so

foolish as to betray his feelings by wanton churlishness. He parted from his companion at the door, leaving him to be welcomed by Mrs. Baxter, the rector's London housekeeper, who had come down two days before ; but at the same time he consented readily to return at half-past six and dine with Lindo, and give him in the course of the meal all the information in his power.

Left to himself, the rector went over the house under Mrs. Baxter's guidance, and, as he trod the polished floors, could not but feel some accession of self-importance. The panelled hall, with its wide oak staircase, led this, and the spacious sombrely-furnished library, with its books and busts, its antique clock and one good engraving, and its lofty windows opening upon the garden. So, in a less degree, did the long oak-panelled dining-room, and a smaller sitting-room which looked to the front and the churchyard ; and the drawing-room, which was placed over the library, and seemed the larger because Mr. Williams had furnished it but scantily and lived in it less. Then there were six or seven bedrooms, and in the garden a stone basin and fountain. Altogether, when the rector descended after washing his hands, and stood on the library hearthrug looking about him, he would have been more than human if he had not with a feeling of thankfulness entertained also some faint sense of self-gratulation and personal desert. Nor, probably, would Mr. Clode have been human if, coming in and finding the younger man standing on that hearthrug, and betraying in his face and attitude

something of his thoughts, he on his part had not felt a degree of envy and antagonism. The man seemed so prosperous, so self-contented, so conscious of his own merit and success.

But the curate was too wise to betray this feeling, and, laying himself out to be pleasant, he had, before the little meal was over, so far ingratiated himself with his entertainer that the rector was greatly surprised when he presently learned that Clode had not been to a university. ‘You astonish me,’ he said. ‘You have so completely the manner of a ’varsity man!’

The observation was a little too gracious, a little wanting in tact, but it would not have hurt the curate had he not been at the moment in a state of irritation. As it was Clode treasured it up, and never got rid of the feeling that the Oxford man looked down upon him because he had been only at Wells; whereas, in fact, Lindo, though sufficiently prone to judge his fellows, had far too high an opinion of himself to be bound by such distinctions, but was just as likely to make a friend of a ploughboy, if he liked him, as of a Christchurch man. After that speech, however, the curate was more than ever resolved to go, and go quickly.

But, when dinner was over and he was about to take his leave, he happened to pick up, as he moved about the room, a small Prayer Book which Lindo had just unpacked, and which was lying on the writing-table. Clode idly looked into it as he talked, and, seeing on the fly-leaf ‘Reginald Lindo,

1850,' found occasion, when he had done with the subject in hand, to discuss it. 'Surely,' he said, holding it up, 'you did not possess this in 1850, Mr. Lindo!'

'Hardly,' the rector answered, laughing. 'I was not born until '54.'

'Then who did?'

'It was my uncle's,' the rector explained. 'I was his godson, and his name was mine also.'

'Is he alive, may I ask?' the curate pursued, looking at the title-page as if he saw something curious there—though, indeed, what he saw was not new to him; only from it he had suddenly deduced an idea.

'No, he died about a year ago—nearly a year ago, I think,' Lindo answered carelessly, and without the least suspicion. 'He was always particularly kind to me, and I use that book a good deal. I must have it rebound.'

'Yes,' Clode said mechanically; 'it wants re-binding, if you value it.'

'I shall have it done. And a lot of these books,' the rector continued, looking at old Mr. Williams's shelves, 'want their clothes renewing. I shall have them all looked to, I think.' He had a pleasant sense that this was in his power. The cost of the furniture and library had made a hole in his private means, which were not very large; but that mattered little now. Eight hundred a year, paid quarterly, will bind a book or two.

Had the curate been attending, he would have read Lindo's thoughts with ease. But Clode was

pursuing a train of reflections of his own, and so was spared this pang. ‘Your uncle was an old man, I suppose,’ he said. ‘I think I observed in the Clergy List that he had been in orders about forty years.’

‘Not quite so long as that,’ Lindo replied. ‘He was sixty-four when he died. He had been Lord Dymore’s private tutor, you know, though they were almost of an age.’

‘Indeed!’ the curate rejoined, still with that thoughtful look on his face. ‘You knew Lord Dymore through him, I suppose, then, Mr. Lindo?’

‘Well, I got the living through him, if that is what you mean,’ Lindo said frankly. ‘But I do not think that I ever met Lord Dymore. Certainly I should not know him from Adam.’

‘Ah!’ said the curate, ‘ah, indeed!’ He smiled as he gazed darkly into the fire, and stroked his chin. In the other’s place, he thought he would have been more reticent. He would not have disclaimed, though he might not have claimed, acquaintance with Lord Dymore. He would have left the thing shadowy, to be defined by others as they pleased. Thinking thus, he got up somewhat abruptly, and wished Lindo good-night. A cool observer, indeed, might have noticed—but the rector did not—a change in his manner as he did so—a little increase of familiarity, which seemed not far removed from a delicate kind of contempt. The change was subtle; but one thing was certain—Stephen Clode had no longer any intention of

leaving Claversham in a hurry. That resolve was gone.

Once out of the house, he walked as if he had business. He passed quickly from the churchyard by a narrow lane leading to an irregular open space quaintly called 'The Top of the Town.' Here were his own lodgings, on the first-floor over a stationer's; but he did not enter them. Instead, he strode on towards the farther and darker side of the square, where were no buildings, but a belt of tall trees stood up, gaunt and rustling in the night wind, above a line of wall. Through the trees the lights of a large house were visible. He walked up the avenue which led to the door, and, ringing loudly, was at once admitted.

The sound of his summons came pleasantly to the ears of two ladies who had been for some time placidly expecting it. They were seated in a small but charming room filled with soft, shaded light and warmth and colour; an open piano and dainty pictures and china, and a well-littered writing-table all contributing to the air of accustomed luxury which pervaded it. The elder lady—that Mrs. Hammond whom we saw talking to the curate on the day of the old rector's funeral—looked up expectantly as Mr. Clode entered, and, extending to him a podgy white hand covered with rings, began to chide him in a rich full voice for being so late. 'I have been dying,' she said cheerfully, 'to hear what is the fate before us, Mr. Clode. What is he like?'

'Well,' he answered, taking with a word of

thanks the cup of tea which Laura offered him, ‘I have one surprise in store for you. He is comparatively young.’

‘Sixty?’ said Mrs. Hammond interrogatively.

‘Forty?’ said Laura, raising her eyebrows.

‘No,’ Clode replied, smiling and stirring his tea, ‘you must guess again. He is twenty-six.’

‘Twenty-six! You are joking,’ exclaimed the elder lady. While Laura opened her eyes very wide, but said nothing yet.

‘No,’ said the curate, ‘I am not. He told me himself that he was not born until 1854.’

The two ladies were first incredulous, then loud in their surprise; while for a moment the curate sipped his tea in silence. The brass kettle hissed and bubbled on the hob. The tea-set twinkled cheerfully on the wicker table, and faint scents of flowers and fabrics filled the room with an atmosphere which he had long come to associate with Laura. It was Laura Hammond, indeed, who had introduced him to this new world. The son of an accountant living in a small Lincolnshire town, Clode owed his clerical profession to his mother’s ardent wish that he should rise in the world. His father was not wealthy, and, before he came as curate to Claversham, he had had no experience of society. Thereon, however, alighting on a sudden in the midst of much such a small town as his native place, he had found himself astonishingly transmogrified into a person of social importance. He found every door open to him, and particularly that of the Hammonds, who were admitted to be the

first people in the town. He fell in easily enough with the 'new learning,' but the central figure in the novel, pleasant world of refinement had always been, and continued still to be, Laura Hammond.

Much petting had somewhat spoiled him, and it annoyed him now, as he sat sipping his tea, to observe that the ladies were far from displeased with his tidings. 'If he is a young man, he is sure not to be evangelical,' said Mrs. Hammond decisively. 'That is well. That is a comfort, at any rate.'

'He will play tennis, too, I dare say,' said Laura.

'And Mr. Bonamy will be kept in some order now,' Mrs. Hammond continued. 'Not that I am blaming you, Mr. Clode,' she added graciously—indeed, the curate was a favourite with her—'but in your position you could do nothing with a man so impracticable.'

'He really will be an acquisition,' cried Laura gleefully, her brown eyes shining in the firelight. And she made her tiny lace handkerchief into a ball and flung it up—and did not catch it, for, with all her talk of lawn-tennis, she was no great player. Her rôle lay rather in the drawing-room. She was as fond of comfort as a cat, and loved the fire with the love of a dog, and was, in a word, pre-eminently feminine, delighting to surround herself with all such things as tended to set off this side of her nature. 'But now,' she continued briskly, when the curate had recovered her handkerchief for her, 'tell me what you think of him. Is he nice?'

'Certainly, I should say so,' the curate answered, smiling.

But, though he smiled, he became silent again. He was reflecting with carefully-hidden bitterness that Lindo would not only override him in the parish, but would be his rival in the particular inner clique which he affected—perhaps his rival with Laura. The thought awoke the worse nature of the man. Up to this time, though he had not been true, though he had kept back at Claversham details of his past history which a frank man would have avowed, though in the process of assimilating himself to his new surroundings he had been over-pliant, he had not been guilty of any baseness which had seemed to him a baseness, which had outraged his own conscience. But, as he reflected on the wrong which this young stranger was threatening to do him, he felt himself capable of much.

'Mrs. Hammond,' he said suddenly, 'may I ask if you have destroyed Lord Dynmore's letter which you showed me last week?'

'Destroyed Lord Dynmore's letter!' Laura answered, speaking for her mother in a tone of comic surprise. 'Do you think, sir, that we get peers' autographs every day of the week?'

'No,' Mrs. Hammond said, waving aside her daughter's flippancy and speaking with some stateliness, 'it is not destroyed, though such things are not so rare with us as Laura pretends. But why do you ask?'

'Because the rector was not sure when Lord

Dynmore meant to return to England,' Clode explained readily. 'And I thought he mentioned the date in his letter to you, Mrs. Hammond.'

'I do not think so,' said Mrs. Hammond.

'Might I look?'

'Of course,' was the answer. 'Will you find it, Laura? I think it is under the malachite weight in the other room.'

It was, sitting there in solitary majesty. Laura opened it, and took the liberty of glancing through it first. Then she gave it to him. 'There, you unbelieving man,' she said, 'you can look. But he does not say a word about his return.'

The curate read rapidly until he came to one sentence, and on this his eye dwelt a moment. 'I hear with regret,' it ran, 'that poor Williams is not long for this world. When he goes I shall send you an old friend of mine. I trust he will become an old friend of yours also.' Clode barely glanced at the rest of the letter, but, as he handed it back, he informed himself that it was dated in America two days before Mr. Williams's death.

'No,' he admitted, 'I was wrong. I thought he said when he would return.'

'And you are satisfied now?' said Laura.

'Perfectly,' he answered. 'Perfectly!' with a little unnecessary emphasis.

He lingered long enough after this to give them a personal description of the newcomer—speaking always of him in words of praise—and then he took his leave. As his hand met Laura's, his face flushed ever so slightly and his dark eyes glowed;

and the girl, as she turned away, smiled furtively, knowing well, though he had never spoken, that she was the cause of this. So she was, but in part only. At that moment the curate saw before him something besides Laura—he saw across a narrow strait of trouble the fair land of preferment, his footing on which once gained he might pretend to her and to many other pleasant things at present beyond his reach.

CHAPTER VI

THE BONAMYS AT HOME

THE rector made his first exploration of his new neighbourhood, not on the day after his arrival, which was, indeed, taken up with his induction by the archdeacon and with other matters, but on the day after that. He chose on this occasion to avoid the streets, in which he felt somewhat shy, so polite were the attentions and so curious the glances of his parishioners; and selected instead a lane which, starting from the churchyard, seemed to plunge at once into the country. It was a pleasant lane. It lay deep sunk in a cutting through the sandstone rock—a cutting first formed, perhaps, when the great stones for the building of the church were dragged up that way. He paused half-way down the slope to look curiously over the landscape, and was still standing when someone came round the corner before him. It was Kate Bonamy. He recognised her at once, and saw the girl's cheek—she was alone—flush ever so slightly as their eyes met; and he noticed, too, that to all appearance she would have passed him with a bow had he not placed himself in her way. 'Come,' he said,

laughing frankly, as he held out his hand, 'you must not cut me, Miss Bonamy! Indeed, you have quite the aspect of an old friend, for until now I have not seen one face since I came here that was not absolutely new to me.'

'It must feel strange, no doubt,' she murmured.

'It does. *I* feel strange!' he replied. 'I want you to tell me where this road goes to, if you please. I am so strange, I do not even know that.'

'It leads to Kingsford Carbonel,' she answered briefly.

'Ah! The archdeacon lives there, does he not?'

'Yes.'

'And the distance is——?'

'Three miles.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'Really, you are as concise as a milestone, Miss Bonamy. And now let me remind you,' he continued—there was an air of 'I am going on this moment' about her, which provoked him to detain her the longer—'that you have not yet asked me what I think of Claversham.'

'I would rather ask you in a month's time,' Kate answered quietly, holding out her hand to take leave. 'Though it is already reported in the town that your stay will not be a long one; indeed, that you will only stay a year.'

'I shall only stay a year!' the rector repeated in astonishment.

'Certainly,' she answered, smiling, and relapsing

for a moment into the pleasant frankness of that day at Oxford—‘only a year; your days are already numbered, it is said.’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked plainly.

‘Have you never heard the old tradition that as many times as a clergyman sounds the bell at his induction, so many years will he remain in the living? The report in Claversham is that you rang it only once.’

‘You did not hear it yourself?’ he said, catching her eyes suddenly, a lurking smile in his own.

Her colour rose faintly. ‘I am not sure,’ she said. And then, meeting his eyes boldly, she added in a different tone, ‘Yes, I did hear it.’

‘Only once?’

She nodded.

‘That is very sad,’ he answered. ‘Well, the tradition is new to me. If I had known it, he added, laughing, ‘I should have tolled the bell at least fifty times. Clode should have instructed me; but I suppose he thought I knew. I remember now that the archdeacon did say something afterwards, but I did not understand the reference. You know the archdeacon, Miss Bonamy, I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Kate, growing stiff again.

‘Do you not? Well, at any rate you can tell me where Mrs. Hammond lives. She has kindly asked me to dine with her on Tuesday. I put my acceptance in my pocket, and thought I would deliver it myself when I came back from my walk.’

‘Mrs. Hammond lives at the Town House,’

Kate answered. 'It is the large house among the trees near the top of the town. You cannot mistake it.'

'Shall I have the pleasure of meeting you there?' he asked, holding out his hand at last.

'No,' she replied, with unexpected decision, 'I do not know Mrs. Hammond, Mr. Lindo. But I am detaining you. Good afternoon.' And with that and a slight bow she left him; rather abruptly at the last.

'That is odd,' Lindo reflected, as, continuing his walk, he turned to admire her graceful figure and the pretty carriage of her head. 'I fancied that in these small towns everyone knew everyone. What sort of people are the Hammonds, I wonder? New, rich, and vulgar, perhaps. It may be so, and that would account for it. Yet Clode spoke well of them.'

Something which he did not understand in the girl's manner continued to pique the young man's curiosity long after he had parted from her, and led him to dwell more intently upon her than upon the scenery, novel as this was to him. She had shown herself at one moment so frank, and at another so stiff and constrained, that it was equally impossible to ascribe the one attitude to shyness or the other to a naturally candid manner. The rector considered the question so long, and found it so puzzling—and interesting—that on his return to town he had come to one conclusion only—that it was his immediate duty to call upon his churchwardens. He had made the acquaintance of Mr.

Harper, his own warden, at his induction. It remained, therefore, to call upon Mr. Bonamy, the people's warden. When he had taken his lunch, it seemed to him that there was no time like the present.

He had no difficulty in finding Mr. Bonamy's house, which stood in the middle of the town, about half-way down Bridge Street. It was a substantial, respectable residence of brick, not detached nor withdrawn from the roadway. It had nothing aristocratic in its appearance, and was known by a number. Its eleven windows, of which the three lowest rejoiced in mohair blinds, were sombre; its doorway was heavy. In a word, it was a respectable middle-class house in a dull street in a country town—a house suggestive of early dinners and set teas. The rector felt chilled by its very appearance; but he knocked, and presently a maid-servant opened the door about a foot. 'Is Mr. Bonamy at home?' he said.

'No, sir,' the girl drawled, holding the door as if she feared he might attempt to enter by force, 'he is not.'

'Ah, I am sorry I have missed him,' said the clergyman, handling his card-case. 'Do you know at what time he is likely to return?'

'No, sir, I don't,' replied the girl, who was all eyes for the strange rector, 'but I expect Miss Kate does. Will you walk upstairs, sir? and I will tell her.'

'Perhaps I had better,' he answered, pocketing his card-case after a moment's hesitation. And

accordingly he walked in and followed the servant to the drawing-room, where she poked the sinking fire and induced a sickly blaze.

Left to himself—for Kate was not there—he looked round curiously, and as he looked the sense of disappointment which he had felt at sight of the house grew upon him. It was a cold, uncomfortable room. It had a set, formal look, which was not quaintness nor harmony, and which was strange to the Londoner. It was so neat: every article in it had a place, and was in its place, and apparently never had been out of its place. There was a vase of chrysanthemums on the large centre table, but the rector thought they must be wax, they were so prim. There were other wax flowers—which he hated. He almost shivered as he looked at the four walls. He felt obliged to sit upright on his chair, and to place his hat exactly in the middle of a square of the carpet, and to ponder over the question of what the maid had done with the poker. For she had certainly not stirred the fire with the bright and shining thing which lay in evidence in the fender.

He was in the act of rising cautiously with the intention of solving this mystery, when the door opened and the elder sister came in, Daintry following her. 'My father is not in, Mr. Lindo,' Kate said, advancing to meet him, and shaking hands with him.

'No; so I learned downstairs,' he answered. 'But I——'

Kate—she had scarcely turned from him—cut

him short with an exclamation of dismay. 'Oh, Daintry, you naughty girl!' she cried. 'You have brought Snorum up.'

'Well,' said Daintry with her usual simplicity—a large white dog, half bulldog, half terrier, with red-rimmed eyes and projecting teeth, had crept in at her heels—'he followed me.'

'You know papa would be so angry if he found him here.'

'But I only want him to see Mr. Lindo. You are unkind, Kate! You know he never gets a chance of seeing a stranger.'

'You want to know if he likes me?' the rector said, laughing.

'That is it,' she answered, nodding.

But Kate, though she laughed, was inexorable, and bundled the big dog out. 'Do you know, she has two more like that, Mr. Lindo?' she said apologetically.

'Snip and Snap,' Daintry explained. 'But they are not like that. They are smaller. Jack gave me Snorum, and Snip and Snap are Snorum's sons.'

'It is quite a genealogy,' the rector said, smiling.

'Yes, and Jack was the genesis. Genesis means beginning, you know,' Daintry vouchsafed.

'Daintry, you must go downstairs if you talk nonsense,' Kate said imperatively. She was looking, the young man thought, prettier than ever in a grey and blue plaid frock and the neatest of collars and cuffs. As for Daintry, she shrugged her shoulders under the rebuke, and lolled in one

of the stiff-backed chairs, her attitude that of a vine clinging to a telegraph-post.

Her wilfulness had one happy effect, however. The rector in his amusement forgot the chill formality of the room and the dull respectability of the house's exterior. For half an hour he talked on without a thought of the gentleman whom he had come to see. Some inkling of the real circumstances of the case which had entered his head before the sisters' appearance faded again, and in gazing on the pure animated faces of the two girls he quickly lost sight of the evidences of lack of taste which appeared in their surroundings. If Kate, on her side, forgot for a moment certain chilling realities, and surrendered herself to the pleasure of the moment, it must be remembered that hitherto—in Claversham, at least—her experience of men had been confined to Dr. Gregg and his fellows; and also that none of us, even the wisest and proudest, are always on guard.

Mr. Bonamy not appearing, Lindo left at last, perfectly assured that the half-hour he had just spent was the pleasantest he had yet passed in Claversham. He went out of the house in a gentle glow of enthusiasm. The picture of Kate Bonamy, trim and neat, with her hair in a bright knot, and laughter softening her eyes, remained with him, and he walked half-way down the grey street, in which the night was falling cheerlessly, his consciousness of outward objects lost in a delightful reverie.

He was roused from it by the approach of a tall elderly man, who, having just turned the corner

before him, was advancing towards him with long, rapid strides. The stranger, who looked about sixty, wore a wide-skirted black coat and had a tall silk hat, from under which the grey hairs straggled thinly, set far back on his head. His figure was spare, his face sallow, his features prominent. His mouth was peevish, his eyes sharp and saturnine. As he walked he kept one hand in his trousers-pocket, the other swung by his side. The rector looked at him a moment in doubt, and then stopped him. 'Mr. Bonamy, I am sure?' he said, holding out his hand.

'Yes, I am,' the other answered, fixing him with a penetrating glance. 'And you, sir?'

'May I introduce myself? I have just called at your house, and, unluckily, failed to find you at home. I am Mr. Lindo.'

'Oh, the new rector!' said Mr. Bonamy, putting out a cold hand, while the glitter of his eye lost none of its steeliness.

'Yes, I am glad to have intercepted you,' Lindo continued, with a little colour in his cheek, and speaking quickly under the influence of his late enthusiasm, which as yet was proof against the lawyer's reserve. 'For I have been extremely anxious to make your acquaintance, and, indeed, to say something particular to you, Mr. Bonamy.'

The elder man bowed to hide a smile. 'As churchwarden, I presume?' he said smoothly.

'Yes, and—and generally. I am quite aware, Mr. Bonamy,' continued the rash young man in a fervour of frankness, 'that you were not disposed

to look upon my appointment—the appointment of a complete stranger, I mean—with favour.’

‘May I ask who told you that?’ said the churchwarden abruptly.

The young clergyman coloured. ‘Well, I—perhaps you will excuse me saying how I learned it,’ he answered, beginning to see that he would have done better to be more reticent. For there is no mistake which youth more often makes than that of arousing sleeping dogs, and trying to explain things which a wiser man would pass over in silence. Mr. Bonamy had his own reasons for regarding the parson with suspicion, and had no mind to be addressed in the indulgent vein. Nor was he propitiated when Lindo added, ‘I learned your feeling, if I may say so, by an accident.’

‘Then I think you should have kept knowledge so gained to yourself!’ the lawyer retorted.

The rector started and turned crimson under the reproof. His dignity was new and tender, and the other’s tone was offensive in a high degree. Yet the young man tried to control himself, and for the moment succeeded. ‘Possibly,’ he said, with some stiffness. ‘My only motive in mentioning the matter, however, was this, Mr. Bonamy, that I hope in a short time, by appealing to you for your hearty co-operation, to overcome any prejudices you may have entertained.’

‘My prejudices are rather strong,’ the lawyer answered grimly. ‘You are quite at liberty to try, however, Mr. Lindo. But I may as well warn you of one thing now, as frankness seems to be in

fashion. I have just been told that you are meditating considerable changes in our church here. Now, I must tell you this, that I object to anything new—anything new, and not only to new incumbents!’ with a smile which somewhat softened his last words.

‘But who informed you,’ cried the young rector, in indignant surprise, ‘that I meditated changes, Mr. Bonamy?’

‘Ah!’ the lawyer answered in his driest and thinnest voice, ‘that is just what I cannot tell you. Let us say that I learned it—by accident, Mr. Lindo!’ And his sharp eyes twinkled.

‘It is not true, however!’ the rector exclaimed.

‘Is it not? Well,’ with a slight cough, ‘I am glad to hear it!’

Mr. Bonamy made the admission, but his tone as he did so was such that it only irritated Lindo the more. ‘You mean that you do not believe me!’ he cried, speaking so strenuously that Clowes the bookseller, who had been watching the interview from his shop-door, was able to repeat the words to a dozen people afterwards. ‘I can assure you that it is so. I am not thinking of making any changes whatever—unless you consider the mere removal of the sheep from the churchyard a change!’

‘I do. A great change,’ replied the churchwarden with grimness.

‘But you surely do not object to it!’ Lindo exclaimed in astonishment. ‘Everyone must agree that in these days, and in town churchyards at any rate, the presence of sheep is unseemly.’

‘I do not agree to that at all!’ Mr. Bonamy answered calmly. ‘Neither did Mr. Williams, the late rector, who had had long experience, act as if he were of that mind.’

The present rector threw up his hands in disgust—in disgust and wonder. Remember, he was very young. The thing seemed to him so clear that he was assured the other was arguing for the sake of argument—a thing we all hate in other people—and he lost patience. ‘I do not think you mean what you say, Mr. Bonamy,’ he blurted out at last. He was much discomposed, yet he made an attempt to assume an air of severity which did not sit well upon him at the moment.

Mr. Bonamy grinned. ‘That you will see when you turn out the sheep, Mr. Lindo,’ he said. ‘For the present, I think I will bid you good evening.’ And taking off his hat gravely—to the rector the gravity seemed ironical—he went his way.

Men take these things differently. To the lawyer there was nothing disturbing in such a passage of arms as this. He was never so happy—Claversham knew it well—as in and after a quarrel. ‘Master Lindo thought to twist me round his finger, did he?’ he muttered to himself as he stopped on his own doorstep and thrust the key into the lock. ‘He has found out his mistake now. We will have nothing new here—nothing new while John Bonamy is warden, at any rate, my lad! It is well, however,’ Mr. Bonamy continued, pausing to cast a backward glance, ‘that Clode gave me a hint in time. Set a beggar on horseback and he

will ride—I know where!’ And the lawyer went in and slammed the door behind him.

Meanwhile, what is sauce for the goose is not always sauce for the gander. The younger man turned away, at the moment, indeed, in a white heat ; full of wrath at the other’s unreasonableness, folly, churlishness. But the comfortable warmth which this feeling engendered passed away quickly—alas ! much too quickly—and long before Lindo reached the rectory—though the walk through the streets, in which the shops were just being lighted, did not take him two minutes—a chill depression had taken its place. This was a fine beginning ! This was a happy augury for his future administration of the parish ! To have begun by quarrelling with his churchwarden—could anything be worse ? And the check had come so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and at a time when he had been on such good terms with himself, that he felt it the more sorely. He went into the house with his head bent, and was not best pleased to find Stephen Clode inquiring after him in the hall. He would rather have been alone.

The curate did not fail to note, as he came forward, that something was amiss, and a gleam of intelligence flashed for an instant across his dark face. ‘Come into the study, will you ?’ said the rector curtly. Since Clode was here, and could not be avoided, he felt it would be a relief to tell him all. Without much delay he did so, the curate listening and making no remark whatever, so that the rector, when he had done, looked at him in

surprise. 'What do you think of it?' he said, some impatience in his tone. 'It is unfortunate, is it not?'

'Well, I don't know,' the curate answered, leaning forward in his chair, with his elbows on his knees and his eyes cast down upon the hat which he was slowly revolving between his hands. 'I am not astonished, you know. What can you expect from a pig but a grunt?'

The rector got up, and, leaning his arm on the mantelshelf, felt, if the truth be told, rather uncomfortable. 'I do not understand you,' he said at length.

'It is what I should have expected from Bonamy. That is all.'

'Then you must think him a very ill-conditioned man!' Lindo retorted, scarcely knowing whether the annoyance he felt was a reminiscence of his late conflict or was caused by his companion's manner.

'Well, again, what else can you expect?' Clode replied sagely, looking up and shrugging his shoulders. 'You know all about him, I suppose?'

'I know nothing,' said the rector, frowning slightly.

'He is not a gentleman, you know,' the curate answered, still looking up, and speaking with languid indolence, as if what he said must be known to everyone. 'You have heard his history?'

'No, I have not.'

'He was an office-boy with Adams and Rooke, the old solicitors here—swept out the office, and

brought the coal, and so forth. He had his wits about him, and old Adams gave him his articles, and finally took him into partnership. Then the old men died off, and it all came to him. He is well off, and has power of a sort in the town; but, of course,' the curate added, getting up lazily and yawning—'well, people like the Hammonds do not visit with him.'

There was silence in the room for a full minute. The rector had left the fireplace, and, with his back to the speaker, was raising the lamp-wick. 'Why did you not tell me this before?' he said at length, his voice hard.

'I did not see why I should prejudice you against the man before you saw him,' replied the curate, with much reason. 'Besides, I really was not sure whether you knew his history or not. I am afraid I did not give much thought to the matter.'

Fie, Mr. Clode, fie!

CHAPTER VII

THE HAMMONDS' DINNER-PARTY

HOWEVER, the bloom was gone. The new top, the new book, the bride—the first joy in the possession of each one of these fades, not gradually, but at a leap, as day fades in the tropics. A chip in the wood, the turning of the last page, the first selfish word, and the thing is done; ecstasy becomes sober satisfaction. It was so with the rector. The first glamour of his good fortune, of his new toy, died abruptly with that evening—with the quarrel with his churchwarden, and the discovery of the cause of that constraint which he had remarked in Kate Bonamy's manner from the first.

He was a conscientious man, and the failure of his good resolutions, his aspirations to be the perfect parish priest, fretted him. Moreover, he had to think of the future. He soon learned that Mr. Bonamy might not be a gentleman, and was indeed reputed to be a stubborn, queer-tempered man; but he learned also that he had great influence in the town, though, except in the way of business, he associated with few, and that he, Reginald Lindo, would have to reckon with him on that footing.

The certainty of this and of the bad beginning he had made naturally depressed the young man, his customary good opinion of himself not coming to his aid at once. And, besides, he carried about with him—sometimes it came between him and his book, sometimes he saw it framed by the autumn landscape—the picture of Kate's pure, proud face. At such moments he felt himself humiliated by the slights cast upon her. The Hammonds did not think her fit company for them! The Hammonds!

Not that he knew the Hammonds yet, or many others, the days which intervened between his induction and the dinner at the Town House being somewhat lonely days, during which he was much thrown back upon himself, and only felt by slow degrees the soothing influence of the routine work of his position. Of his curate, and of him only, he naturally saw much, and found it small comfort to learn from the Reverend Stephen that the fracas with Mr. Bonamy had not escaped the attention of the town, but was being made the subject of comment by many who were delighted to have so novel a topic as the new rector and his probable conduct.

He was sitting at breakfast a few days later—on the morning of the Hammonds' party—when Mrs. Baxter announced an early visitor. 'No, he is not a gentleman, sir,' she said, 'though he has on a black coat. A stranger to the town, I think, but he will not say what he wants, except to see you.'

'I will come to him in the study,' her master answered.

The housekeeper, however, on going out, and taking a second glance at the caller, did not show him into the study; but, instead, gave him a seat in the hall on the farther side from the coat-stand. There the rector, when he came out, found him—a pale, fat-faced, small-eyed man, dressed neatly and decorously, though his black clothes were thread-bare. He took him into the study, and asked him his business. ‘But first sit down,’ the rector added pleasantly, desiring to set the man at his ease.

The stranger sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair. For a moment there was a pause of seeming embarrassment, and then he broke it abruptly. ‘I am body-servant, sir,’ he said, passing his tongue across his lips and looking up furtively to learn the effect of his announcement, ‘to the Earl of Dynmore.’

‘Indeed!’ the rector replied, with a slight start. ‘Has Lord Dynmore returned to England, then?’

Again the man looked up slyly. ‘No, sir,’ he answered with deliberation; ‘I cannot say that he has, sir.’

‘You have brought some letter or message from him, perhaps?’ the clergyman hazarded. The stranger seemed to have a difficulty in telling his own story.

‘No, sir, if you will pardon me, I have come about myself, sir,’ the man answered, speaking a little more freely. ‘I am in a little bit of trouble, and I think you would help me, sir, if you heard the story.’

‘I am quite willing to hear the story,’ said the rector gravely. Looking more closely at the man, he saw now that his neatness was only on the surface. His white cravat was creased, and his wrists displayed no linen. An air of seediness marked him, viewed in the full light of the windows; and, pale as his face was, it wore here and there a delicate flush. Perhaps the man’s admission that he was in trouble helped the rector to see this.

‘Well, sir, it was this way,’ the servant began. ‘I was not very well out there, sir, and his lordship—he is an independent kind of man—thought he would be better by himself. So he gave me my passage-money and board wages for three months, and told me to come home and take a holiday until he returned to England. So far it was all right, sir.’

‘Yes?’ said the rector.

‘But on board the boat—I am not excusing what I did, sir; but there are others have done worse,’ the man continued, with another of his sudden upward glances—‘I was led to play cards with a set of sharpers, and—and the end of it was that I landed at Liverpool yesterday without a half-penny.’

‘That was bad.’

‘Yes, it was, sir. I do not know that I ever felt so bad in my life,’ replied the servant earnestly. ‘And now you know my position, sir. There are several people in the town—but they have no means to help me—who can tell you I am his lordship’s valet, and my name is Charles Felton.’

'You want help, I suppose?'

'I have not a halfpenny, sir! I want something to live on until his lordship comes back.'

His tone seemed to change as he said this, growing hard and almost defiant. The rector noted the alteration, and did not like it. 'But why come to me?' he said, more coldly than he had yet spoken. 'Why do you not go to Lord Dymore's steward, or agent, or his solicitor, my man?'

'They would tell of me,' was the curt answer. 'And likely enough I should lose my place.'

'Still, why come to me?' Lindo persisted—chiefly to learn what was in the man's mind, for he had already determined what he would do.

'Because you are rector of Claversham, sir,' the applicant answered at last. And he rose and confronted the parson with an unpleasant smile on his pale face—'which is in my lord's gift, as you know, sir,' he continued, in a tone rude and almost savage—a tone which puzzled his companion, who was not conscious of having said anything offensive to the man. 'I came here, sir, expecting to meet an older gentleman—a gentleman of your name, a gentleman known to me—and I find you. I see you, do you see, where I expected to find him.'

'You mean my uncle, I suppose?' said Lindo.

'Well, sir, that is as may be. You know best,' was the odd reply, and the man's look was as odd as his words. 'But that is how the case stands; and, seeing it stands so, I hope you will help me, sir. I do hope, on every account, sir, that you will see your way to help me.'

The rector looked at the speaker with a slight frown, liking neither him nor his behaviour. But he had already made up his mind to help him, if only in gratitude to Lord Dynmore, whose retainer he was; and this, though the earl would never know of the act, nor possibly approve of it. The man had at least had the frankness to own the folly which had brought him to these straits, and Lindo was inclined to set down the oddity of his present manner to the fear and anxiety of a respectable servant on the verge of disgrace. 'Well,' he said coldly, after a moment's thought, 'I am willing to help you. Of course I shall expect you to repay me if and when you are able, Felton.'

'I will do that,' replied the man rather cavalierly.

'You might have added, "and thank you, sir,"' the rector said, with a keen glance of reproof. He turned, as he spoke, to a small cupboard constructed among the bookshelves near the fireplace, and, opening it, took out a cash-box.

The man coloured under his reproach, and muttered some apology, resuming, as by habit, the tone of respect which seemed natural to him. All the same he watched the clergyman's movements with great closeness, and appraised, even before it was placed in his hand, the sum which Lindo took from a compartment set apart apparently for gold. 'I will allow you ten shillings a week—on loan, of course,' Lindo said after a moment's thought. 'You can keep yourself on that, I suppose? And, besides, I will advance you a sovereign to supply

yourself with anything of which you have pressing need. That should be ample. There are three half-sovereigns.'

This time the man did thank him with an appearance of heartiness, and might have said more, had not the study-door opened, and Stephen Clode come in, his hat in his hand. 'Oh, I beg your pardon,' the curate said, taking in at a glance the open cash-box and the stranger's outstretched hand, and preparing to withdraw. 'I thought you were alone.'

'Come in, come in!' said the rector, closing the money-box hastily, and with some embarrassment, for he was not altogether sure that he had not done a foolish and quixotic thing. 'Our friend here is going. You can send me your address, Felton. Good-day.'

The man thanked him again, and, taking up his hat, went. 'Someone out of luck?' said Clode, looking after him.

'Yes.'

'I did not much like his looks,' the curate remarked. 'He is not a townsman, or I should know him.'

The rector felt that his discretion was assailed, and hastened to defend himself. 'He is respectable enough,' he said carelessly. 'As a fact, he is Lord Dynmore's valet.'

'What! Has Lord Dynmore come back?' the curate exclaimed, his hand arrested in the act of taking down a book from a high shelf, and his head turning quickly. If he expected to learn anything,

however, from his superior's demeanour he was disappointed. Lindo was busy locking the cupboard, and had his back to him.

'No, he has not come back himself,' the rector explained, 'but he has sent the man home, and the foolish fellow lost his money on the boat coming over, and wants an advance until his master's return.'

'But why on earth does he come to you for it?' cried the curate, with undisguised astonishment.

The rector shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, I do not know,' he said, a trifle of irritation in his manner. 'He did, and there is an end of it. Is there any news?'

Mr. Clode seemed to find a difficulty in at once changing the direction of his thoughts. But he did so with an effort, and, after a pause, answered, 'No, I think not. There is a good deal of interest felt in the question of the churchyard sheep, I fancy—whether you will take your course or comply with Mr. Bonamy's whim.'

'I do not know myself,' the young rector answered, turning and facing the curate, his feet apart and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. 'I do not, indeed. It is a serious matter.'

'It is. Still, you bear the responsibility,' said the curate with diffidence, 'and, without expressing any view of my own on the subject, I confess——'

'Well?'

'I think, if I bore the responsibility, I should feel called upon to do what I myself thought right in the matter.'

The younger man shook his head doubtfully.

'There is something in that,' he said; 'but, on the other hand, one cannot look on the point as an essential; and, that being so, perhaps one should prefer peace. But there, enough of that now, Clode. I think you said you were not going to the Hammonds' this evening?'

'No, I am not.'

The rector almost wished he were not. However sociable a man may be, a few days of solitude and a little temporary depression will render him averse to society if he be in the least degree sensitive. Lindo as a man was not very sensitive; he held too good an opinion of himself. But as a rector he was, and as he walked across to the Town House to dinner he anticipated anything but enjoyment.

In a few minutes, however—has it not some time or other fallen out so with all of us?—everything was changed with him. He felt as if he had entered another world. The air of culture and refinement which surrounded him from the hall inwards, the hearty kindness of Mrs. Hammond, the pretty rooms, the music and flowers, Laura's light laughter and pleasant badinage, all surprised and delighted him. The party might almost have been a London party, it was so lively. The archdeacon, a red-faced, cheery, white-haired man, whose acquaintance Lindo had already made, and his wife, who was a mild image of himself, were of the number, which was completed by their daughter and four or five county people, all prepared to welcome and be pleased with the new rector. Lindo, sprung from

gentlefolk himself, had the ordinary experience of society; but here he found himself treated, as a stranger and a dignitary, to a degree of notice and a delicate flattery of which he had not before tasted the sweets. Perhaps he was the more struck by the taste displayed in the house, and the wit and liveliness of his new friends, because he had so little looked for them—because he had insensibly judged his parish by his experience of Mr. Bonamy, and had come expecting this house to be as his.

If, under these circumstances, the young fellow had been unaffected by the incense offered to him he would have been more than mortal. But he was not. He began, before he had been in the house an hour, to change, all unconsciously of course, his point of view. He began to wonder especially why he had been so depressed during the last few days, and why he had troubled himself so much about the opinions of people whose views no sensible man would regard.

Perhaps the girl beside him—he took Laura in to dinner—contributed as much as anything to this. It was not only that she was bright and sparkling—nay, in the luxury of her pearls and evening dress even enchanting—nor only that the femininity which had enslaved Stephen Clode began to have its effect on her new neighbour. But Laura had a way while she talked to him, while her lustrous brown eyes dwelt momentarily on his, of removing herself and himself to a world apart—a world in which downrightness seemed

more downright and rudeness an outrage. And so, while her manner gently soothed and flattered her companion, it led him almost insensibly to—well, to put it in the concrete, to think scorn of Mr. Bonamy.

‘You have had a misunderstanding,’ she said softly, as they stood together by the piano after dinner, a feathering plant or two fencing them off in a tiny solitude of their own, ‘with Mr. Bonamy, have you not, Mr. Lindo?’

From any one else, perhaps from her half an hour before, he would have resented mention of the matter. Now he did not seem to mind. ‘Something of the kind,’ he said laughing.

‘About the sheep in the churchyard, was it not?’ she continued.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, will you pardon me saying something?’ Resting both her hands on the raised lid of the piano, she looked up at him, and it must be confessed that he thought he had never seen eyes so soft and brilliant before. ‘It is only this,’ she said earnestly—‘that I hope you will not give way to him. He is a wretched cross-grained fidgety man and full of crotchets. You know all about him, of course?’ she added, a slight ring of pride in her voice.

‘I know that he is my churchwarden,’ said the rector, half in seriousness.

‘Yes!’ she replied. ‘That is just what he is fit for!’

‘You think so?’ Lindo retorted, smiling.

‘Then you really mean that I should be guided by him? That is it?’

She looked brightly at him for a moment. ‘I have not known you long,’ she murmured, ‘but I think you will be guided only by yourself,’ and, blushing slightly, she nodded and left him, to go to another guest.

They were all in the same tale. ‘He is a rude overbearing man, Mr. Lindo,’ Mrs. Hammond said roundly, even her good-nature giving place to the *odium theologicum*. ‘And I cannot imagine why Mr. Williams put up with him so long.’

‘No, indeed,’ said the archdeacon’s wife, complacently smoothing down her skirt. ‘But that is the worst of a town parish. You have this sort of people.’

Mrs. Hammond looked for the moment as if she would like to deny it. But under the circumstances this was impossible. ‘I am afraid we have,’ she admitted gloomily. ‘I hope Mr. Lindo will know how to deal with him.’

‘I think the archdeacon would,’ said the other lady, shaking her head sagely.

But, naturally enough, the archdeacon was more guarded in his expressions. ‘It is about removing the sheep from the churchyard, is it not?’ he said, when he and Lindo happened to be left standing together and the subject came up. ‘They have been there a long time, you know.’

‘That is true, I suppose,’ the rector answered. ‘But,’ he continued rather warmly—‘you do not approve of their presence there, archdeacon?’

‘No, certainly not.’

‘Nor do I. And, thinking the removal right, and the responsibility resting upon me, ought I not to undertake it?’

‘Possibly,’ replied the older man cautiously. ‘But pardon me making a suggestion. Is not the thing of so little importance that you may with a good conscience prefer quiet to the trouble of raising the question?’

‘If the matter were to end there, I think so,’ replied the new rector, with perhaps too strong an assumption of wisdom in his tone. ‘But what if this be only a test case?—if to give way here mean to encourage further trespass on my right of judgment? The affair would bear a different aspect then, would it not?’

‘Oh, no doubt: No doubt it would.’

And that was all the archdeacon, who was a cautious man and knew Mr. Bonamy, would say. But it will be observed that the rector on his part had both altered his standpoint and done another thing which most people find easy enough: he had discovered an answer to his own arguments.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO SURPRISES

ON the evening of the Hammonds' party, Mr. Clode sat alone in his room, trying to compose himself to work. His lamp burned brightly, and his tea-kettle—he had sent down his frugal dinner an hour or more—murmured pleasantly on the hob. But for some reason Mr. Clode could do no work. He was restless, gloomy, ill-satisfied. The suspicions which had been aroused in his breast on the evening of the rector's arrival had received, up to to-day at least, no confirmation; but they had grown, as suspicions will, feeding on themselves, and with them had grown the jealousy which had fostered them into being. The curate saw himself already overshadowed by his superior, socially and in the parish; and this evening felt this the more keenly that, as he sat in his little room, he could picture perfectly the gay scene at the Town House, where, for nearly two years, not a party had taken place without his presence, not a festivity been arranged without his co-operation. The omission to invite him to-night, however natural it might seem to others, had for him a

tremendous significance; so that from a jealousy that was general he leapt at once to a jealousy more particular, and conjured up a picture of Laura—with whose disposition he was not unacquainted—smiling on the stranger, and weaving about him the same charming net which had caught his own feet.

At this thought the curate sprang up with a passionate gesture and began to walk to and fro, his brow dark. He felt sure that Lindo had no right to his cure, that he had been appointed by mistake; but he knew also that the cure was a freehold, and that to oust the rector from it something more than a mere mistake would have to be shown. If the rector should turn out to be very incompetent, if he should fall on evil times in the parish, then, indeed, he might find his seat untenable when the mistake should be discovered; and with an eye to this the curate had already dropped a word here and there—as, for instance, that word which had reached Mr. Bonamy. But Clode was not satisfied with that now. Was there no shorter, no simpler course possible? There was one; one only, which he could think of. The rector might be shown to have been aware of the error when he took advantage of it. In that case his appointment would be vitiated, and he might be compelled to forego it.

Naturally enough, the curate had scarcely formulated this to himself before he became convinced—in his present state of envy and suspicion—of the rector's guilt. But how was he to prove

it? How was he to make it clear to others? As he walked up and down the room, chafing and hot-eyed, he thought of a way in which proof might be secured. The letters which had passed between Lindo and Lord Dynmore's agents, in regard to the presentation, must surely contain some word, some expression sufficiently clear to have apprised the young man of the truth—that the living was intended, not for him, but for his uncle. A look at those letters, if they were in existence, might give Stephen Clode, mere curate though he was, the whip-hand of his rector!

He had another plan in his mind, of which more presently; and probably he would have pursued the idea which has just been mentioned no further if his eye had not chanced to light at the moment on a small key hanging from a nail by the fireplace. Clode looked at the key, and his face flushed. He stood thinking and apparently hesitating, the lamp throwing his features into strong relief, while a man might count twenty. Then he sat down with an angry exclamation and plunged into his work. But in less than a minute he lifted his head. His glance wandered again to the key; and, getting up suddenly, he took it down, put on his hat, and went out.

His lodgings were over the stationer's shop, but he could go in and out through a private passage. He saw, as he passed, however, that there was a light in the shop, and he opened the side door. 'I am going to the rectory to consult a book, Mrs. Wafer,' he said, seeing his landlady dusting the

counter. 'You can leave my lamp alight. I shall want nothing more to-night, thank you.'

She bade him good-night, and he closed the door again and issued into the street. Crossing the top of the town, he had to pass the Market Hall, where he spoke to the one policeman on night duty; and here he saw that it was five minutes to ten, and hastened his steps, in the fear that the rector's household might have retired. 'Lindo will not be home himself until eleven, at the earliest,' he muttered as he turned rapidly into the churchyard, which was very dark, the night being moonless. 'I have a clear hour. It was well that I looked in late the other night.'

But, whatever his design, it received a sudden check. The rectory was closed! The front of the house stood up as dark and shapeless as the great church which towered in front of it. The servants had gone to bed, and, as they slept at the back, he would have found it difficult to arouse them, had it suited his plans to do so. As it was, he did not dream of such a thing. With a slight shiver—for the night was cold, and now that his project no longer excited him he felt it so, and felt, too, the influence of the night wind sighing in sad fashion through the yews—he was turning away, when something arrested his attention, and he paused.

The something he had seen, or fancied he had seen, was a momentary glimmer of light shining through the fanlight over the door. It could not affect him, for, if the servants had really closed the house for the night, even if they had not all gone

to bed, he could scarcely go in. And yet some impulse led him to step softly into the porch, and grope for the knocker.

His hand lit instead on the iron-studded surface of the old oak door, and, to his surprise, he felt it move slightly under his touch. He pushed, and the door slid slowly and silently open, disclosing the dusky outline of the hall, faintly illuminated by a thin shaft of light which proceeded apparently from the study, the door of which was a trifle ajar.

The sight recalled to the curate's mind the errand on which he had come, and he stole across the hall on tiptoe, listening with all his ears. He heard nothing, however, and presently he stood on the mat at the study door, his form intercepting the light. Then he did hear the dull footsteps of someone moving in the room, and suddenly it occurred to him that the rector had stepped home to fetch something—a song, music, or a book possibly—and was now within searching for it. That would explain all.

The curate was seized with panic at the thought, and, fearful of being discovered in his present position—for though he might have done all he had done in perfect innocence, conscience made a coward of him—he crept across the hall again and passed out into the churchyard. There he stood in the darkness, waiting and watching, expecting the rector to bustle out each minute.

But five minutes passed, and even ten, as it seemed to the curate in his impatience, and no one came out, nor did the situation alter. Then he

made up his mind that the person moving in the study could not be the owner of the house, and he went in again and, crossing the hall, flung the study door wide open and entered.

Instantly there was a ringing sound as of coins falling on the floor; and a man, who had been kneeling low over something, sprang to his feet and gazed with wide, horror-stricken eyes at the intruder. A moment only the man looked, and then in a paroxysm of terror he fell again on his knees. 'Oh, mercy! mercy!' he cried, almost grovelling before the curate. 'Don't give me up! I have never been took! I have never been in gaol or in trouble in my life! I did not know what I was doing, sir! I swear I did not! Don't give me up!'

The man's cry, which was low and yet piercing, ended in hysterical sobbing. On the table by his side stood a single candle, and by its light Clode saw that the little cupboard among the books—the little cupboard to which the key in his own pocket belonged—was open. The curate started at the sight, and grew pale and red by turns. The words which he had been about to utter to the shrinking wretch begging for mercy on the floor before him died away in his husky throat. His eyes, however, burned with a gloomy rage, and when he recovered himself his voice was pitiless. 'You scoundrel!' he said, in the low rich tone which had been so much admired in the church when he first came to Claversham, 'what are you doing here? Get up and speak!' And he made as if he would spurn the creature with his foot.

‘I am a respectable man,’ the rogue whined. ‘I am—that is, I was, I mean, sir—don’t be hard on me—Lord Dynmore’s own valet. I will tell you all, sir.’

‘I know you!’ Clode rejoined, looking harshly at him. ‘You were here this morning. And Mr. Lindo gave you money.’

‘He did, sir. I confess it. I am a——’

‘You are an ungrateful scoundrel!’ Stephen Clode answered, cutting the man short. ‘That is what you are! And in a few days you will be a convicted felon, with the broad-arrow on your clothes, my friend!’

To hear his worst anticipations thus put into words was too much for the poor wretch. He fell on his knees, feebly crying for mercy, mercy! ‘You are a minister of the Gospel. Give me this one more chance, sir!’ he prayed.

‘Stop that noise!’ the curate growled fiercely, his dark face rendered more rugged by the light and shadow cast by the single candle. ‘Be silent! do you hear? and get up and speak like a man, if you can. Tell me all—how you came here, and what you came for, and perhaps I may let you escape. But the truth, mind—the truth!’ he added truculently.

The knave was too thoroughly terrified indeed to think of anything else. ‘Lord Dynmore dismissed me,’ he muttered, his breath coming quickly. ‘He missed some money in Chicago, and he gave me enough to carry me home, and bade me go to the devil! I landed in Liverpool without a shil-

ling—sir, it is God's truth—and I remembered the gentleman Lord Dynmore had just put into the living here. I used to know him, and he has given me half a sovereign more than once. And I thought I would come to him. So I pawned my clothes, and came on.'

'Well?' exclaimed the curate, leaning forward, with fierce impatience in his tone. 'And then?'

'Sir?'

'Well? When you came here? What happened? Go on, fool!' He could scarcely control himself.

'I found a stranger,' the man whimpered—'another Mr. Lindo. He had got in here somehow.'

'Well? But there,' the curate added with a sudden change of manner, 'how do you know that Lord Dynmore meant to put the clergyman you used to know in here?'

'Because I heard him read a letter from his agents about it,' the man replied simply. 'And from what his lordship said I knew it was his old pal—his old friend, sir, I mean, begging your pardon humbly, sir.'

'And when did you learn,' said the curate more quickly, 'that the gentleman here was not your Mr. Lindo?'

'I heard in the town that he was a young man. And, putting one thing and another together, and keeping a still tongue myself, I thought he would serve me as well as the other, and I called——'

'What did you say?'

‘Not much, sir,’ the valet answered, a twinkle of cunning in his eye. ‘The less said the sooner mended, I thought. But he understood, and he promised to give me ten shillings a week.’

‘To hold your tongue?’

‘Well, so I took it, sir.’

The curate drew a long breath. This was what he had suspected. It was to information which might be drawn from this man that his second scheme had referred. And here was the man at his service, bound by a craven fear to do his bidding—bound to tell all he knew. ‘But why,’ Clode asked suspiciously, a new thought striking him, ‘if what you say be true, are you here now—doing this, my man?’

‘I was tempted, sir,’ the servant answered, his tone growing abject again. ‘I confess it truly, sir. I saw the money in the box here this morning, sir, and I thought that my ten shillings a week would not last long, and a little capital would set me up comfortably. And then the devil put it into my head that the young gentleman would not prosecute me, even if he caught me.’

‘You did not think of me catching you?’ retorted the curate grimly.

The man uttered a cry of anguish. ‘That I did not, sir,’ he sobbed. ‘O Lord! I have never had a policeman’s hand on me. I have been honest always——’

‘Until you took his lordship’s money,’ replied Clode quietly. ‘But I understand. You have never been found out before, you mean.’

When people of a certain class, for whom respectability has long spelled livelihood, do fall into the law's clutch, they suffer very sharply. Master Felton continued to pour forth heartrending prayers; but he might have saved his breath. The curate's thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking that a witness so valuable must be kept within reach at any cost, and it did flash across his brain that the best course would be to hand him over now to the police, and trust to the effect which his statements respecting the rector would produce at the inquiry. But the reflection that the allegations of a man on his trial for burglary would not obtain much credence led Clode to reject this simple course and adopt another. 'Look here!' he said curtly. 'I am going to deal mercifully with you, my man. But—but,' he continued, frowning impatiently, as he saw the other about to speak, 'on certain conditions. You are not to leave Claversham. That is the first. If you leave the town before I give you the word, I shall put the police on your track without an instant's delay. Do you hear that?'

'I will stop as long as you like, sir,' said the servant submissively; but with wonder apparent both in his voice and face.

'Very well. I wish it for the present—no matter why. Perhaps because I would see that you lead an honest life for awhile.'

'And how—how shall I live, sir?' asked the culprit timidly.

'For the present you may continue to draw

your half sovereign a week,' the curate answered, his face reddening, he best knew why. 'Possibly I may tell Mr. Lindo at once. Possibly I may give you another chance, and tell him later, if I find you deserving. What is your address?'

'I am at the "Bull and Staff,"' muttered Felton. It was a small public-house of no very good repute.

'Well, stay there,' Stephen Clode answered after a moment's thought. 'But see you get into no harm. And since you are living on the rector's bounty, you may say so.'

The man looked puzzled as well as relieved, but, stealing a doubtful glance at the curate's dark face, he found his eyes still upon him, and cowered afresh. 'Yes, take care,' Clode said, smiling unpleasantly as he saw the effect his look produced. 'Do not try to evade me, or it will be the worse for you, Felton. And now go! But see you take nothing from here.'

The detected one cast a sly glance at the half-rifled box which still lay on the carpet at his feet, a few gold coins scattered round it; then he looked up again. 'It is all there, sir,' he said, cringing. 'I had but just begun.'

'Then go!' said the curate impatiently, pointing with emphasis to the door. 'Go, I tell you!'

The man's presence annoyed and humiliated him so that he felt a positive relief when the valet's back was turned. Left alone he stood listening, a cloud on his brow, until the faint sound of the outer door being pulled to reached his ear; and

then, stooping hastily, he gathered up the sovereigns and half-sovereigns, which lay where they had fallen, and put them into the box. This done, he rose and laid the box itself upon the table by his side ; and again he stood, still and listening, a dark shade on his face.

Long ago, almost at the moment of his entrance, he had seen the pale shimmer of papers at the back of the little cupboard ; and his heart had bounded at the sight. Now, still listening stealthily, he thrust in his hand and drew out one of the bundles of papers, and opened it. A final scruple held him back for a second ; then he looked, only to be disappointed. The papers were parish accounts in his own handwriting ! With a gesture of fierce impatience he thrust them back and drew out others, and, disappointed again in these, exchanged them hastily for a third set. In vain ! The last were as worthless to him as the first.

He was turning away baffled and defeated, with a dark face and anger in his heart, when he saw lying at the back of the lower compartment of the cupboard, whence the cash-box had come, two or three smaller packets, consisting apparently of letters. The curate reached hastily for one of these, and the discovery that it contained some of Lindo's private accounts, dated before his appointment, made his face flush and his fingers tremble with eagerness. He glanced nervously round the room and stopped to listen ; then, moving the candle a little nearer, he ran his eye over the papers. But here, too, though the scent was hot,

he took nothing, and he exchanged the packet for one of the others. Looking at this, he saw that it was indorsed in the rector's handwriting, 'Letters relating to the Claversham Living.'

'At last,' Clode muttered, his eyes burning. 'I have it now.' The string which bound the packet was knotted tightly, and his fingers seemed all thumbs as he laboured to unfasten it. But he succeeded at length, and opening the uppermost letter (they were all folded across), he saw that it was written from Lincoln's Inn Fields. 'My dear sir,' he read—just so far; and then, with a mighty crash which sounded awfully in his ears, the door behind him was flung open, just as he had flung it open himself an hour before; and, dropping the letter, he sprang round, to find the young rector confronting him with a face of stupid astonishment.

CHAPTER IX

TOWN TALK

HE was a man, as the reader will perhaps have gathered, of many shifts, and cool-headed ; but for a moment he felt something of the anguish of discovery which had so tortured the surprised servant. The table shook beneath his hand, and it was with difficulty he repressed a wild impulse to overturn the candle, and escape in the darkness. He did repress it, however ; nay, he forced his eyes to meet the rector's, and twisted his lips into the likeness of a smile. But when he thought of the scene afterwards he found his chief comfort in the reflection that the light had been too faint to betray his full embarrassment.

Naturally the rector was the first to speak. 'Clode !' he ejaculated, with a soft whistle, his surprise above words. 'Is it you ? Why, man,' he continued, still standing with his hand on the door and his eyes devouring the scene, 'what is up ?'

The money-box stood open at the curate's side, and the letters lay about his feet where they had fallen. The little cupboard yawned among the

books. No wonder that Lindo's amazement, as he gradually took it all in, rather increased than diminished, or that the curate's heart for a moment stood still: that his tongue was dry and his throat husky when he at last found his voice. 'It is all right. I will explain it,' he stammered, almost upsetting the table in his agitation. 'I expected you before,' he added fussily, moving the light.

'The dickens you did!' the rector ejaculated. It was difficult for him not to believe that his arrival had been the last thing expected.

'Yes,' returned the curate, with a little snap of defiance. He was recovering himself, and could look the other in the face now. 'But I am glad you did not come before, all the same.'

'Why?'

'I will explain.'

The light which the one candle gave was not so meagre that Clode's embarrassment had altogether escaped Lindo; and had the latter been a suspicious man he might have had queer thoughts, and possibly expressed them. As it was, he was only puzzled, and when the curate said he would explain, answered simply, 'Do.'

'The truth is,' said Clode, beginning with an effort, 'I have taken a good deal on myself, and I am afraid you will blame me, Mr. Lindo. If so, I cannot help it.' His face reddened, and he beat a tattoo on the table with his fingers. 'I came across,' he continued, 'to borrow a book a little before ten. The lights here were out; but, to my surprise, your house-door was open.'

‘As I found it myself!’ the rector exclaimed.

‘Precisely. Naturally I had misgivings, and I looked into the hall. I saw a streak of light proceeding from the doorway of this room, and I came in softly to see what it meant. I heard a man moving about in here, and I threw open the door much as you did.’

‘Did you?’ said Lindo eagerly. ‘And who was it—the man, I mean?’

‘That is just what I cannot tell you,’ the curate replied. His face was pale, but there was a smile upon it, and he met the other’s gaze without flinching. He had settled his plan now.

‘He got away, then?’ said the rector, disappointed.

‘No. He did not try either to escape or to resist,’ was the answer.

‘But was he really a burglar?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then where is he?’ The rector looked round as if he expected to see the man lying bound on the floor. ‘What did you do with him?’

‘I let him go.’

Lindo opened his mouth, and whistled; and when he had done whistling still stood with his mouth open and a face of the most complete mystification. ‘You let him go?’ he repeated mechanically, but not until after a pause of half a minute or so. ‘Why, may I ask?’

‘You have every right to ask,’ the curate answered with firmness, and yet despondently. ‘I will tell you why—why I let him go, and why I

cannot tell you his name, Mr. Lindo. He is a parishioner of yours. It was his first offence, and I believe him to be sincerely penitent. I believe, too, that he will never repeat the attempt, and that the accident of my entrance saved him from a life of crime. I may have been wrong—I dare say I was wrong,’ continued the curate, growing excited—excitement came very easily to him at the moment—‘but I cannot go back from my word. The man’s misery moved me. I thought what I should have felt in his place, and I promised him, in return for his pledge that he would live honestly in the future, that he should go free, and that I would not betray his name to any one—to any one!’

‘Well!’ exclaimed the rector, his tone one of unbounded admiration in every sense of the word. ‘When you do a thing nobly, my dear fellow, you do do it nobly, and no mistake! I wonder who it was? But I must not ask you.’

‘No,’ said Clode. ‘And now, tell me,’ he continued, still beating the tattoo on the table, ‘you do not blame me greatly?’

‘I do not, indeed. No. Only I think perhaps that you should have retained the right to tell me.’

‘I should have done so,’ said the curate regretfully.

‘He has taken nothing, I suppose?’ the rector continued, turning to the cupboard, and, not only feeling satisfied with the explanation, but liking Clode better than he had liked him before; speaking to him, indeed, with increased frankness.

‘No,’ the other answered. ‘I was putting things straight when you entered and startled me. He had dropped the money about the floor, but you will find it right, I think. He has made a mess among the papers, I fear, and damaged the cupboard door in forcing it, but that is the extent of the mischief. By the way,’ the curate added, ‘I have a key to this cupboard at my lodgings. Williams gave it to me. He only kept parish matters here. I must let you have it.’

‘Right,’ said the rector carelessly; and then a few more words passed between them as to the attempted robbery, and the manner in which the outer door had been opened. At last the curate took his hat and prepared to go. ‘You had a pleasant party, I suppose?’ he said, pausing and turning when half-way across the hall.

‘A *very* pleasant one,’ Lindo answered with enthusiasm.

‘They are nice people,’ said Clode.

‘They are—very nice. You told me I should find them so, and you were right. Good-night.’

‘Good-night.’

Such harmless words! And yet they roused the curate’s jealousy anew. As he walked home, the church clock tolling midnight above his head, he drank in no peaceful influence from the dark stillness or the solemn sound. He was gnawed by no remorse, but was tormented instead by fresh hatred of the man who had surprised and confounded him, and forced him to lie and quibble in order to escape from a dishonourable position. If

you would make a man your enemy, come upon him when he is doing something of which he is ashamed. He will fear you afterwards, but he will hate you more. In the curate's case it was only he who knew himself discovered, so that he had no ground for fear. But he hated none the less vigorously.

And he was not one to hate, and stop at that. In a few days an ugly rumour of which the new rector was the subject began in some strange way to gain currency in the town. It was an ill-defined rumour, coming to one thing in one person's mouth and to a different thing in another's—a kind of cloud on the newcomer's fair fame, shifting from moment to moment, and taking ever a fresh shape, yet always a cloud.

One whispered that he had obtained the presentation as the reward of questionable services rendered to the patron. Another, that he had forged his own deed of presentation, if such a thing existed. A third, that he had been presented by mistake; and a fourth, that he had deceived the authorities as to his age. It was noticeable that these rumours began low down in the social scale of the town and worked their way upwards, which was odd; and further that, whatever form the rumour took, there was not one who heard it who did not within a fortnight or three weeks come to associate it with the presence of a seedy, down-looking, unwholesome man, who was much about the rector's doorway, and, when he was not there, was generally to be found at the 'Bull and Staff.'

Whether he was the disseminator of the reports, or, alike with the rector, was the unconscious subject of them, was not known; but at sight of him—particularly if he were seen, as frequently happened, in the rector's neighbourhood—people shrugged their shoulders and lifted their eyebrows, and expressed a great many severe things without using their tongues.

To the circle of the rector's personal friends the rumours did not reach. That was natural enough. To tell a person that his or her intimate friend is a forger or a swindler is a piquant but somewhat perilous task. And no one mentioned the matter to the Hammonds, or to the archdeacon, or to the Homfrays of Holberton, or the other county people living round, with whom it must be confessed that, after that dinner-party at the Town House, Lindo consorted perhaps too exclusively. It might have been thought that even the townsfolk, seeing the young fellow's frank face passing daily about their streets, and catching the glint of his fair curly hair when the wintry sunlight pierced the lanthorn windows and fell in gules and azure on the reading-desk, would have been slow to believe such tales of him.

They might have been; but circumstances and Mr. Bonamy were against him. The lawyer did not circulate the stories; he had not mentioned them out-of-doors, nor, for aught the greater part of Claversham knew, had heard of them at all. But all his weight—and with the Low-Church middle class in the town it was great—was thrown

into the scale against the rector. It was known that he did not trust the rector. It was known that day by day his frown on meeting the young clergyman grew darker and darker. And the why and the wherefore not being understood—for no one thought of questioning the lawyer, or observed how frequently of late the curate hopped upon him in the street or in the reading-room—many concluded that he knew more of the clergyman's antecedents than appeared.

There was one person, and perhaps only one, who openly circulated and rejoiced in these rumours. This was a man whom Lindo would least have suspected; one whom he met daily in the street, and passed with a careless nod and a word, not dreaming for an instant that the spiteful little busybody was concerning himself with him. But such was the case. The man was Dr. Gregg; the snappish, ill-bred surgeon who chanced upon Lindo and the Bonamy girls breakfasting together at Oxford. The sight, it will be remembered, had not pleased him. He had long had a sneaking liking for Miss Kate himself, and had only refrained from trying to win her because he still more desired to be of the 'best set' in Claversham. He had been ashamed, indeed, up to this time of his passion; but, reading on that occasion unmistakable admiration of the girl in the young clergyman's face, and being himself rather cavalierly treated by Lindo, he had somewhat changed his views. The girl had acquired increased value in his eyes. Another's appreciation had increased his own, and,

merely as an incident, the man who had effected this had earned his hearty jealousy and ill-will. And all this, while Lindo thought him a vulgar but harmless little man.

Still, if the rector, immersed in new social engagements, did not see whither he was tending, others, though they knew nothing of the unpleasant tales we have mentioned, saw more clearly. The archdeacon, coming into town one Saturday five or six weeks after Lindo's arrival, did his business early and turned his steps towards the rectory. He felt pretty sure of finding the young fellow at home, because he knew this was his sermon day. A few yards from the door he fell in, as it chanced, with Stephen Clode. The two stood together talking, while the archdeacon waited to be admitted, and presently the curate, noticing what he was about, said, 'If you wish to see the rector, archdeacon, I am afraid you will be disappointed. He is not at home.'

'But I thought that he was always at home on Saturdays?'

'Generally he is,' Clode replied, looking down and tracing a pattern with the point of his umbrella.

'But he is away to-day.'

'Where?' asked the archdeacon rather abruptly.

'He has gone to the Homfrays' at Holberton. They have some sort of party to-day, and the Hammonds drove him over.' Despite himself, the curate's tone was sullen, his manner constrained.

'Oh!' said the archdeacon thoughtfully. The Homfrays were his very good friends, but of the

county families round Claversham they were reckoned the fastest and most frivolous. And he sagely suspected that a man in Lindo's delicate position might be wiser if he chose other companions. 'Lindo seems to see a good deal of the Hammonds,' he remarked after a pause.

'Yes,' said Clode. 'It is very natural.'

'Oh, very natural,' the archdeacon hastened to say; but his tone clearly expressed the opinion that 'toujours Hammonds' was not a good bill of fare for the rector of Claversham. 'Very natural, of course. Only,' he continued, taking courage, for he really liked the rector, 'you have had some experience here, and I think it would be well if you were to give him a hint not to be too exclusive. A town rector must not be too exclusive. It does not do.'

'No,' said Clode.

'It is different in the country, of course. And then there is Mr. Bonamy. He is unpleasant, I know, and yet he is honest after a fashion. Lindo must beware of getting across with him. He has done nothing about the sheep yet, has he?'

'No.'

'Well, do not let him, if you can help it. You are not urging him on in that, are you?'

'On the contrary,' the curate answered rather warmly, 'I have all through told him that I would not express an opinion on it. If anything, I have discouraged him in the matter.'

'Well, I hope he will let it drop now. I hope he will let it drop.'

They parted then, and the archdeacon, sagely revolving in his mind the evils of exclusiveness as they affected town parsons, strolled back to the hotel where he put up his horses. On his way, casting his eye down the wide quiet street, with its old-fashioned houses on this side and that, he espied Mr. Bonamy's tall spare figure approaching, and he purposely passed the inn and went to meet him. As a county magnate the archdeacon could afford to know Mr. Bonamy, and even to be friendly with him. I am not sure, indeed, that he had not a sneaking liking and respect for the rugged, snap-pish, self-made man.

'How do you do Mr. Bonamy?' he began loudly and cheerfully. And then, after saying a few words about a proposal to close a road in which he was interested, he slid into a mention of Lindo, with a view to seeing how the land lay. 'I have just been to call on your rector,' he said.

'You did not find him at home,' Bonamy replied, with a queer grin, and a little jerk of his head which sent his hat still farther back.

'No, I was unlucky.'

'Not more than most people,' said the churchwarden, with much enjoyment. 'I will tell you what it is, Mr. Archdeacon. Mr. Lindo is better suited for your position. He would make a very good archdeacon. With a pair of horses and a park phaeton and a small parish, and a little general superintendence of the district—with that and the life of a country gentleman he would get on capitally.'

There was just so much of a jest in the words that the clergyman had no choice but to laugh. 'Come, Bonamy,' he said good-humouredly, 'he is young yet.'

'Oh, yes, he is quite out of place here in that respect, too!' replied the lawyer naïvely.

'But he will improve,' the archdeacon pleaded.

'I am not sure that he will have the chance,' Mr. Bonamy answered in his gentlest tone.

The archdeacon was so far from understanding him that he did not answer save by raising his eyebrows. Could Bonamy really be so foolish, he wondered, as to think he could get rid of a beneficed clergyman? The archdeacon was surprised, and yet that was all he could make of it.

'He is away at Mr. Homfray's of Holberton now,' the lawyer continued, condemnation in his thin voice.

'Well, there is no harm in that, Mr. Bonamy,' replied the archdeacon, somewhat offended, 'as long as he is back to do the duty to-morrow.'

Mr. Bonamy grunted. 'A one-day-a-week duty is a very fine thing,' he said. 'You clergymen are to be envied, Mr. Archdeacon!'

'You would be a great deal more to be envied yourself, Mr. Bonamy,' the magnate returned, losing his temper at last, 'if you did not carp at everything and look at other people through distorted glasses. Fie! here is a young clergyman, new to the parish, and, instead of helping him, you find fault with everything he does. For shame! For shame, Mr. Bonamy!'

‘Ah!’ the lawyer answered drily, quite unabashed by the other’s attack, ‘you did not mean to say that when you came across the street to me. But—well, least said soonest mended, and I will wish you good evening. You will have a wet drive home, I am afraid, Mr. Archdeacon.’

And he put up his umbrella and went his way sturdily, while the archdeacon, crossing to his carriage, which was standing in front of the inn, entertained an uncomfortable suspicion that he had done more harm than good by his intercession. ‘I am afraid,’ he said to himself, as he handled the reins, and sent his horses down the street in a fashion of which he was ordinarily not a little proud—‘I am afraid that there is trouble in front of that young man. I am afraid there is.’

If he had known all, he would have shaken his head still more gravely.

CHAPTER X

OUT WITH THE SHEEP !

STEPHEN CLODE had no idea, as he stood listening with a certain pleasure to the archdeacon's hints, of the good turn which fortune was about to do him. If he had foreseen it, he would probably have taken a bolder part in the conversation, and parted from the elder clergyman with a more jubilant step. As it was, he heard no rumour that evening; nor was it until ten o'clock on the Sunday morning that he learned anything was amiss. But, calling at the house in the churchyard at that hour, he was received by Mrs. Baxter herself; and he remarked at once that the housekeeper's face fell in a manner far from flattering when she recognised him.

'Oh, it is you, is it, Mr. Clode?' she said, her tone one of disappointment. 'You have not seen him, sir, have you?' she added anxiously.

'Seen whom?' the curate replied in surprise.

'Mr. Lindo, sir?'

'Why? Is he not here?'

'Not here? No, sir, he is not,' the housekeeper said, putting her head out to look up and down.

‘He never came back last night from Holberton, and we have not heard of him. I sent across to the Town House to inquire, and the only thing Mrs. Hammond could say was that Mr. Lindo was to follow them, and they supposed he had come.’

‘Well, but—who is to do the duty at the church?’ Clode ejaculated, shaping his lips to a whistle. His dismay at the moment was genuine, for he did not see on the spur of the moment how this might tend to his advantage.

‘There is only you, sir, unless he comes in time,’ the housekeeper replied.

‘But I am going to the Hamlet church,’ Clode answered, rapidly turning things over in his mind. If there should be no one at the parish church to conduct the chief service of the week, what a talk there would be! It would almost be matter for the bishop’s interference! ‘You see, I cannot possibly neglect that,’ he continued argumentatively, in answer as much to the remonstrances of his own conscience as to the housekeeper. ‘It was the rector’s own arrangement, Mrs. Baxter. You may be sure he will be here in time for the eleven o’clock service. Mr. Homfray has kept him over night. That is all.’

‘You do not think he has met with an accident, sir?’ Mrs. Baxter suggested anxiously. ‘They say the coal-pits on Baer Hill——’

‘Pooh, pooh! He will be here in a few minutes, you will see,’ the curate answered. And he affected to be so cheerfully certain of this that he would

not wait even for a little while, but started at once for the Hamlet church—a small chapel-of-ease in the outskirts of the town. There he put on his surplice early, and was ready in excellent time. For punctuality is a virtue.

At half-past ten the bells of the great church began to ring, and presently door after door in the quiet streets about it opened silently, and little parties issued forth in their Sunday clothes and walked stiffly and slowly towards the building. At the moment when the High Street was dotted most thickly with these groups, and the small bell was tinkling its impatient summons, the rattle of an old taxed-cart was heard—first heard as the vehicle flashed quickly over the bridge at the foot of the street. One and another of the church-goers turned to look, for such a sound was rare on a Sunday morning. Great was their astonishment when they recognised, perched up beside the boy who urged on the pony, no less a person than the rector himself! As he jogged up the street in his sorry conveyance and with his sorry companion, he had to pass under the fire of a battery of eyes which did not fail to notice all the peculiarities of his appearance. His tie was awry and his chin unshaven. He had a haggard, dissipated air, as of one who had been up all night, and there was a stain of dirt on his cheek. He looked dissipated—even disreputable, some said; and he seemed aware of it, for he sat erect, gazing straight before him, and declining to see any one. At the top of the street he descended hastily, and, as the bell jerked

out its final note, hurried towards the vestry with a depressed and gloomy face.

‘Well!’ said Mr. Bonamy to Kate, who was walking up the street by his side, and whose face for some mysterious reason was flushed and troubled, ‘I think that is the coolest young man within my experience!’

‘Eh?’ said a voice behind them as they entered the porch—the speaker was Gregg. ‘What do you think of that, Bonamy? A gay young spark, is he not?’

There was time for no more then. But as the congregation waited in their seats through a long voluntary, many were the nods and winks, and incessant the low mutterings, as one communicated to another the details of the scene outside, and his or her view of them. When the rector appeared—nine minutes late by Mr. Bonamy’s watch—he looked pale and fagged, and the sermon he preached was of the shortest. Nine-tenths of the congregation noted only the brevity of the discourse and drew their conclusions. But Kate Bonamy, who sat by her father with downcast eyes and a tinge of colour still in her cheeks, and who scarcely once looked up at the weary face and tumbled hair, fancied, heaven knows why, that she detected a new pathos and a deeper tone of appeal in the few simple sentences; and though she had scarcely spoken to the rector for a month, and was nursing a little contempt for him, the girl felt on a sudden more kindly disposed towards the young man.

Not so Mr. Bonamy. He came out of church chuckling; full of a grim delight in the fulfilment of his predictions. It was not his custom to linger in the porch, for he was not a sociable man; but he did so to-day, and, letting Kate and Daintry go on, formed one of a coterie of men who had no difficulty in coming to a conclusion about the rector.

‘He has been studying hard, poor fellow!’ said Gregg, with a wink—there is no dislike so mean and cruel as that which the ill-bred man feels for the gentleman—‘reading the devil’s books all night!’

‘Nine minutes late!’ said the lawyer. ‘That is what comes of having a young fellow who is always gadding about the country!’

‘He could not gad to a more congenial place than Holberton, I should think,’ sneered a third.

And then all the sins which the Homfrays had ever committed, and all those which had ever been laid to their charge, were cited to render the rector’s case more black. To do him justice, Mr. Bonamy took but a listener’s part in this. He was a shrewd man, and he did not believe that the rector could have had anything to do with an elopement from Holberton which had taken place before his name was heard in the county; but he was honestly assured that the young fellow had been sitting over cards or the billiard-table half the night. And as for the other crimes, perhaps he would commit them if he were left to follow his own foolish devices.

‘What is ill-gotten soon goes,’ said one charitable person with a sneer. ‘You may depend upon it that what we hear is true.’

‘Yes, it is all of a piece,’ another said. ‘A man does not have a follower of that kind for nothing.’

‘It comes over the devil’s back, and goes—you know how!’ chimed in a third. ‘But perhaps he is wise to make the most of it while it lasts. He is consequential enough now, but the Homfrays will not have much to say to him presently, you will see. A few weeks, and he will go!’

‘Well, let him go, for the d—d dissipated gambling parson he is!’ said Gregg coarsely, carried away by the unusual agreement with him. ‘And the sooner the better, say I!’

The man beside him, a little startled by the doctor’s violence, turned round to make sure that they were not overheard; and found himself face to face with no less a person than the rector, who, seeking to go out—as was not his custom, for he generally used the vestry door—by the porch, had walked into the midst of the group, even as Gregg opened his mouth. A glance at the young man’s reddening cheek and compressed lips apprised the startled gossips that he had overheard some part at least of what had been said.

In one way it was the crisis of his fate at Claversham. But he did not know it. If he had been wise—if he had been such a man as his curate, for instance; or if, without being wise, he had learned a little of the prudence which comes of

necessity with years—he would have passed through the group in silence, satisfied with such revenge as mute contempt could give him. But he was not old, nor very wise; and certain things had lately jarred on his nerves, so that he was not quite himself. He did not pass by in silence, but, instead, stood for a moment. Then, singling Gregg out with a withering glance, he gave vent to his feelings. ‘I am much obliged to you for your good opinion,’ he said to him; ‘but I should be still more obliged if you would swear elsewhere, sir, and not in the porch of my church. Leave the building! Go at once!’ And he pointed towards the churchyard with the air of an angry schoolmaster addressing a pupil.

But Gregg did not move. He was astounded by this direct attack, but he had the courage of numbers on his side, and, though he did not dare to answer, he did not budge. Neither did the others, though they felt ashamed of themselves, and looked all ways at once. Only one of them all met the rector’s glance fairly and squarely, and that was Mr. Bonamy. ‘I think the least said the soonest mended, Mr. Lindo,’ he replied, with an acrid smile.

‘I am sorry that you did not think of that before,’ retorted the young man, standing before them with his fair head thrown back, his clerical coat hanging loose, and his brow dark with indignation—for he had heard enough to be able to guess the cause of Gregg’s remark. ‘Do you come to church only to cavil and backbite?—to put the

worst construction on what you cannot understand ?’

‘Speaking for myself,’ the churchwarden replied coolly, ‘the sole thing with which I can charge myself is the remark that you were somewhat late for service this morning, Mr. Lindo.’

‘And if I was?’ the clergyman said in his haughtiest tone.

‘Well, of course there may have been a good cause for it,’ the lawyer replied drily. ‘But it is a thing I have not known happen here for twenty years.’

The rector hesitated, but only for a moment. An altercation with these men, none of whom were well disposed towards him, and half of whom were tradespeople, was the last thing upon which he should have allowed himself to enter; and the last thing to which he would have condescended in his normal frame of mind. But on this unlucky morning he was nervous and irritable; and, finding himself thus bearded and defied, he spoke foolishly. ‘You trouble yourself too much, Mr. Bonamy,’ he said impulsively, ‘with things which do not concern you! The parish, among other things. You have set yourself, as I know, to thwart and embarrass me; but I warn you that you are not strong enough! I shall find means to——’

‘To put me down, in fact?’ said Mr. Bonamy.

The young man hesitated, his face crimson. His opponent’s sallow features, seamed with a hundred astute wrinkles, warned him, if the covert smiles of the others did not, that, in his present

mood at any rate, he was not a match for the lawyer. He had gone too far already, as he was now aware. 'No,' he replied, swallowing his rage, 'but to keep you to your proper province, as I hope to keep to mine. I wish you good-morning.'

He passed through them then, and hurried away, more angry with them, and with himself for allowing them to provoke him, than he had ever felt in his life. He knew well that he had been foolish. He knew that he had lowered himself in their eyes by his display of temper. But, though he was bitterly annoyed with himself, the consciousness that the fault had originally lain with them, and that they had grievously misjudged him, kept his anger hot; for there is no wrath so fierce as the indignation of the man falsely accused. He called them under his breath an uncharitable, spiteful, tattling crew; and was so far immersed in thought of them that he had entered his dining-room before he remembered that he was engaged to take the midday meal at the Town House; as he had done once or twice before, afterwards walking up with Laura to the schools.

He washed and changed hurriedly, keeping his anger hot the while, and then went across, with the tale on the tip of his tongue. Again, if he had been wise, he would have kept what had happened to himself. But the soothing luxury of unfolding his wrongs to someone who would sympathise was a balsam he could not in his soreness forego.

It was a particularly mild day for the fourth

Sunday in Advent, and he found Miss Hammond still lingering before the door. She was looking for violets under the north wall, and he joined her, and naturally broke at once into the story of what had happened. She was wearing a little close bonnet, which set off her piquant features and bright colouring to peculiar advantage, and, as far as looks went, no young man in trouble ever had a better listener. Only to stand beside her on the lawn, where the old trees shut out all view of the town and the troubles he connected with it, was a relief. Of course the search for violets was soon abandoned. 'It is abominable !' she said. 'It is really abominable of them !' But her voice was like the cooing of a dove. She did everything softly. Even her indignation was gentle.

'But you have not heard yet,' he protested, 'why I really was late.'

'I know what is being said,' she murmured, looking up at him, a gleam of humour in her brown eyes—'that you stayed at the Homfrays' all night playing cards. My maid told me as we came in after church.'

'Ha ! I knew that they were saying something of the kind,' he replied savagely. He took the matter so much to heart that she felt her little attempt at badinage reproved. 'The true reason was of a very different description,' he continued earnestly. 'What spiteful busybodies they are ! I started to return last evening about half-past nine, but as I passed Baer Hill Colliery I learned that there had been an accident. A man going down the shaft

with the night shift had been crushed—hurt beyond help,’ the rector continued in a lower voice. ‘He wanted to see a clergyman; and the other pitmen, some of whom had seen me pass earlier in the day, stopped me and took me to him.’

‘How sad! How very sad!’ she ejaculated, her voice low and constrained. Somehow she felt ill at ease with him in this mood. With his last words a kind of veil had fallen between them.

‘I stayed with him the night,’ the rector continued. ‘He died at half-past nine this morning. I came straight from that to this. And they say these things of me!’

His voice, though low, was hard, and yet there was a suspicious break in it as he uttered his last words. Injustice touches a man, young and not yet hardened, very sorely; and he was overwrought. Laura, fingering her little bunch of violets, heard the catch in his voice, and knew that he was not very far from tears.

She was almost terrified. She longed to respond, to say the proper thing, but here her powers deserted her. She was not capable of much emotion, unless the call especially concerned herself; and she could not rise to this occasion. She could only murmur again that it was abominable and too bad; or, taking her cue from the young man’s face, say that it was very sad. She said enough, it is true, to satisfy him, though not herself; for he only wanted a listener. And for the rest, when he went in to lunch, Mrs. Hammond more than bore him out in all his denunciations; so that when he

left to go to the schools he had fully made up his mind to carry things through.

The quarrel, indeed, did him more injury by throwing him into the arms of the party which his own pleasure and taste led him to prefer, than in any other way. He did not demur when Mrs. Hammond—meaning little evil, but expressing prejudices which at one time she had sedulously cultivated (for when one lives near the town one must take especial care not to be confounded with it)—talked of a set of butchers and bakers, and said, much more strongly than he had, that Mr. Bonamy must be kept in his place. No, he did not demur. Nay, he assented. A little quarrel with the lawyer, a little social relaxation in which the young fellow had lost sight of the excellent intentions with which he had set out, then this final quarrel—such had been the course of events; sufficient, taken with his own fastidiousness and inexperience, to bring him to this, and to make a breach between him and the parish a most probable event.

Mrs. Hammond, standing at the drawing-room window, watched him as he walked down the short drive. ‘I like that young man,’ she said decisively. ‘He is thrown away upon these people.’

Her daughter, who had not gone to the schools, yawned. ‘He has not one-half the brains of some one else we know, mother,’ she answered.

‘Who is that?’

But Laura did not reply; and probably her mother understood, for she did not press the ques-

tion. 'Well,' Mrs. Hammond said, after a moment's silence, 'perhaps he has not. I do not know. But at any rate he is a gentleman from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes.'

'I daresay he is,' Laura admitted languidly.

Mrs. Hammond, depositing her portly form in a suitable chair, watched her daughter curiously. She would have given a good deal to be able to read the girl's mind and learn her intentions; but she was too wise to ask questions, and had always given her the fullest liberty. She had watched the growth of the intimacy between Laura and Mr. Clode without demur, feeling a considerable liking for the man herself, though she scarcely thought him a suitable match for her daughter. On the old rector's death there had seemed for a few days a chance of Mr. Clode being appointed his successor; and at that time Mrs. Hammond had fancied she detected a shade of anxiety and excitement in Laura's manner. But Clode had not been appointed, and the new rector had come; and Laura had apparently transferred her favour from the curate to him.

At this Mrs. Hammond had felt somewhat troubled—at first; but in a short time she had naturally reconciled herself to the change, the rector's superiority as a *parti* being indisputable. Yet still Mrs. Hammond felt no certainty as to Laura's real feelings, and, gazing at her this afternoon, was as much in the dark as ever. That the girl was fond of her she knew; indeed, it was quite a pretty sight to see the daughter purring about the mother. But

Mrs. Hammond was more than half inclined to doubt now whether Laura was fond, or capable of being fond, of any other human being except herself.

She sighed gently as she thought of this, and rang the bell for tea. 'I think we will have it early this afternoon,' she said. 'I feel I want a cup.'

CHAPTER XI

THE DOCTOR SPEAKS

THE anxious feelings with which the curate hastened, on the conclusion of his own service, to learn what had happened at the great church may be imagined. His excitement and curiosity were not the less because he had to hide them. If there really had been no service—if the rector had not appeared—what a scandal, what a subject for talk was here! Even if the rector had appeared a little late there would still be whispering; for new brooms are expected to sweep clean. The curate composed his dark face, and purposely made one or two sick-calls at houses which lay in his road, lest he might seem to ask the question he had to put too pointedly. By the time he reached the rectory he had made up his mind, judging from the absence of stir in the streets, that nothing very unusual had happened.

‘Is the rector in?’ he asked the servant.

‘No, sir; he has gone to the Town House to dinner,’ the girl answered.

Involuntarily Mr. Clode frowned. ‘He was in

time for service, I suppose ?' he asked, more abruptly than he had intended.

'Oh yes, sir,' the maid answered readily. She had not been to church, and knew nothing.

'Thank you ; that is all,' he answered, turning away. So nothing had come of it after all ! His heart was sick with disappointed hope as he turned into his own dull lodgings ; and he felt that the rector in being in time had wronged him afresh, and by dining at the Town House had added insult to injury.

But in the course of the day he learned how late the rector had been ; and early next morning some rumour of the triangular altercation in the church porch also reached him—of course in an exaggerated form. As a fact, all Claversham was by this time talking of it, Mr. Bonamy's companions, with one exception, taking good care to make the most of his success, and to paint the rebuff he had administered to the clergyman in the deepest colours. The curate heard the news with a face of grave concern, but with secret delight ; and, turning over in his mind what use he might make of it, came opportunely upon Gregg as the latter was going his rounds. 'Hallo !' he cried, speaking so loudly that the doctor, who had turned away and would fain have retreated, could not decently escape, 'you are the very man I wanted to see ! What is this absurd story about the rector and you ? There is not a word of truth in it, I suppose ?'

'I am sure I cannot say until you tell me what

it is,' replied the doctor snappishly. He was a little afraid of the curate, who had a knack of being unpleasant without giving an opening in return.

'Why, you seem rather sore about it,' Clode remarked, with apparent surprise.

'I do not know why I should be,' sneered the doctor, his face dark red with anger.

'Certainly not, if there is no truth in the story,' the curate replied, looking down with his eyes half shut at the chafing little man. 'But I suppose it is all an invention, Gregg?'

'It is not an invention that the rector was abominably rude to me,' blurted out the doctor, who scarcely knew with whom to be most angry—his present tormentor or the first cause of his trouble.

'Pooh!' said Clode, 'it is only his way.'

'Then it is a d——, I mean, it is a most unpleasant way!' retorted the doctor savagely.

'He means no harm,' said the curate gaily. 'Why did you not answer him back?'

Dr. Gregg's face turned a shade redder. That was where the shoe pinched. Why had he not answered him back, as Bonamy had; and not stood mute, acknowledging himself the smaller man? That was what was troubling him now, and making him fancy himself the laughing-stock of the town. 'I will answer him back in a way he will not like!' he cried viciously, striving to hide his embarrassment under a show of bluster.

'Tut-t-tut!' said the curate provokingly, 'do not go and make a fool of yourself by saying things

like that, when you know you don't mean them, man. What can you say to the rector ?'

'I will ask him——'

But what he would ask the rector was lost to the world, for at that moment Mr. Bonamy, coming down the pavement behind him, touched his sleeve. 'I have just been to your house, doctor,' he said. 'My younger girl is a little out of sorts. Would you mind stepping in and seeing her ?'

Gregg swallowed his wrath, and secretly perhaps was thankful for the interruption. He muttered that he would ; and the lawyer turned to Mr. Clode. 'Well,' he said, with a grim geniality, 'so you have made up your minds to fight ?'

'I am not quite sure,' the curate answered with caution—for he knew better than to treat Mr. Bonamy as he treated Gregg—'that I take you.'

'You have not seen your principal this morning ?' replied the lawyer, with a smile which for him was almost benevolent. The prospect of a fight was as the Mountains of Beulah to him.

'Do you mean Mr. Lindo ?' asked the curate, with some curtness.

The lawyer nodded. 'I see you have not,' he continued. 'So I daresay you do not know that he turned the sheep out of the churchyard after breakfast this morning, and half of them were found nearly a mile away down the Red Lane !'

'I did not know it,' said the curate gravely and quietly, though it was as much as he could do to restrain his exultation. It was by a mighty effort he restrained all signs save of concern.

‘Well, it is the fact,’ the lawyer replied, rubbing his hands with every sign of geniality. ‘It is quite true he gave the churchwardens notice to remove them a fortnight ago; but we did not comply, because we say it is our affair and not his. Now you may tell him from me that the only question in my mind is the form of action.’

‘I will tell him,’ said the curate with dignity.

‘Just so! What do you say, Gregg?’

But the doctor, grinning from ear to ear with satisfaction, was gone; and the curate, not a whit less pleased in his heart, hastened to follow his example, and march off down the street. ‘Bonamy one, and Gregg two,’ he said softly to himself, ‘and last, but not least, one who shall be nameless, three! He has made three enemies already, and if those be not enough, with right on their side, to oust him from his seat when the time comes, why, I know nothing of odds!’

‘With right on their side,’ the curate said, even to himself. It is true he had made no second attempt to pry into the rector’s secrets or to bring home to him a knowledge of the wrongfulness of his possession. But he did still believe, or persuaded himself he believed, that Lindo was a guilty man; or why should the young rector pension the old earl’s servant? On this ground Clode justified to himself the secret ill-turns he was doing him. A month’s intimacy with the rector would probably have convinced an impartial mind of his good-faith. But the curate had not, it must be remembered, an impartial mind; and we are all very apt to believe what suits us.

To return to the little doctor, whom we left going on his way in a mood almost hilarious. He saw with joy that this fresh escapade of the rector's would wipe out the memory of the fray in which he had himself borne so inglorious a part. And the more he thought of the rector's difficulties, the greater was his admiration of the lawyer, whom he had long patronised in a timid fashion, much as a snub-nosed King Charlie patronises a butcher's mongrel. Now he began to feel a positive reverence for him. He began to think it possible that, with all his drawbacks of birth, Mr. Bonamy might become a personage in the town, and pretty Kate not so bad a match. These musings quickly had their effect on a mind already prepared to receive them favourably; so quickly that, by the time he reached the lawyer's door, an idea which he had first entertained on seeing the young clergyman's admiration for Kate Bonamy, and which he had since turned over more than once in his mind, had become a settled purpose. So much so that, as he rang the bell, he looked at his hands. They were not gloved, nor were they so clean as they might have been, but he pished and pshawed, and settled his light-blue scarf—which the next minute rose again to the level of his collar—and at length went in with a briskly juvenile air and an engaging smile.

He found Daintry lying on the sofa in the dining-room, her head on a white bed-pillow. Kate was leaning over her. The room was in some disorder—littered with this and that, a bottle of

eau de Cologne, Mr. Bonamy's papers, some books, some sewing; but it looked comfortable, for it was very evidently inhabited. A fastidious eye might have thought it was too much inhabited; and yet proofs of refinement were not wanting, though the sofa was covered with horsehair, and the mirror was heavy and ugly, and the grate, knee-high, was as old as the Georges. There were flowers on the table and on the little cottage-piano; and by the side of the last was a violin-case. Not many people in Claversham knew that Mr. Bonamy played the violin. Still fewer had heard him play, for he never did so out of his own house.

Possibly a very particular suitor might have preferred to find Kate attending on her sister in a boudoir, or at least in a room free from a lawyer's papers, furnished in a less solid and durable style, and with some livelier look-out than through wire blinds upon a dull street. But another might have thought that the office in which she was engaged, and the gentleness of her touch and eye as she went about it, made up for all deficiencies.

Dr. Gregg was not of a nature to appreciate either the deficiencies or the set-off; but he had eyes for the girl's grace and beauty, for the neatness of the well-fitting blue gown and the white collar and cuffs; and he shook hands with her and devoted himself to Daintry—who disliked him extremely and was very fractious—with the most anxious solicitude. 'It is only a sick headache!' he said finally, with bluntness which was meant for encouragement. 'It is nothing, you know.'

‘I wish you had it, then!’ Daintry wailed, burying her face in the pillow.

‘It will be gone in the morning,’ he retorted, rising, and keeping his temper by an unnatural effort. ‘She will be the better for it afterwards, Miss Bonamy.’

To this Daintry vouchsafed no answer, unless a muttered ‘Rubbish!’ were intended for one. He affected not to hear it. He was all good-temper this morning; the unfortunate point about this being that his good-nature was a shade more unpleasant than his usual snappish manner.

At any rate Kate thought it so. She felt the instinctive repulsion which the wrong man’s wooing awakens in an unspoiled girl. She was conscious of an added dislike for him as she held out her hand to him at the dining-room door. But she did not divine the cause of this; nor for a moment conjecture his purpose when he said in a low voice that he wished to speak to her outside.

‘May we go in here a moment?’ he muttered, when the door was safely closed behind them. He pointed to the room on the other side of the hall, which Mr. Bonamy used in summer as a kind of office.

‘There is no fire there,’ Kate answered. ‘I think it has been lighted upstairs, however, if you do not mind coming up, Dr. Gregg. Is there anything’—this was when he had silently followed her into the stiff drawing-room, where the newly-lit fire was rather smoking than burning—‘serious the matter with her, then?’

Her voice was steady, but her eyes betrayed the sudden anxiety his manner had aroused in her.

‘With your sister?’ he answered slowly. He was really pondering how he should say what he had come to say. But, naturally, she set down his thoughtfulness to a professional cause.

‘Yes,’ she said anxiously.

‘Oh, no—nothing, nothing. The truth is,’ the doctor continued, following up a happy thought and smiling approval of it, ‘the matter is with me, Miss Bonamy.’

‘With you!’ Kate exclaimed, opening her eyes in astonishment. Her momentary anxiety had put all else out of her head. She thought the doctor had gone mad.

‘Yes,’ he said jerkily, but with a grin of tender meaning. ‘With me. And you are the cause of it. Now do not be frightened, Miss Kate,’ he continued hastily, seeing her start of apprehension; ‘you must have known for a long time what I was thinking of.’

‘Indeed I have not,’ Kate murmured in a low voice. She did not affect to misunderstand him now.

‘Well, you easily might have known it then,’ he retorted rather sharply, forgetting his *rôle* for an instant. ‘But the long and the short of it is that I want you to marry me. I do!’ he repeated, overcoming something in his throat, and going on from this point swimmingly. ‘And you will please to hear me out, and not answer in a hurry, Miss Kate. If you like—but I should not think that

you would want it—you can have until to-morrow to think it over.'

'No,' she replied impulsively, her face crimson. And then she shut her mouth so suddenly, it seemed she was afraid to let anything escape it except that unmistakable monosyllable.

'Very well,' he replied, comfortably settling his elbow upon the mantelshelf, and turning his hat in his hands, while he kept his eyes on her, 'that is as you like. I hope it does not want much thinking over myself. I will not boast that I am a rich man, but I am decently off. I flatter myself that I can keep my head above water—and yours, too, for the matter of that.'

'Oh, it is not that,' she answered hurriedly.

'Now, do not be in a hurry,' he said jocularly—his last remarks had put him into a state of considerable self-satisfaction, and he no more thought it likely that she would refuse him than that the sky would fall—'do not buy a pig in a poke! Hear me out first, Miss Kate, and we shall start fair. You have been in my house, and, if it is not quite so large a house as this, I will answer for it you will find it a great deal more lively. You will see people you have never seen here, nor will see while your name is Bonamy. You will have—well, altogether a better time. Not that I mind myself,' the doctor added rather vaguely, forgetting the French proverb about those who excuse themselves, 'what your name is, not I! So don't you think you could say Yes at once, my dear?'

He took a step nearer, thinking he had put it

rather neatly and without any nonsense. Possibly, from his point of view, he had. But Kate fell back, nevertheless, as he advanced.

‘Oh, no,’ she said, flushing painfully. ‘I could not! I could not indeed, Dr. Gregg! I am very sorry.’

‘Come, come,’ he said, holding out his hand, his tone one of pleasant raillery—he had looked for some hanging back, some show of coyness and bashfulness, and was prepared to laugh in his sleeve at it—‘I think you can, Kate. I think it is possible.’ That it was in woman’s nature to say No to his comfortable home and the little lift in society he had to offer—it is only little lifts we appreciate, just up the next floor above us—he did not believe.

But Kate soon undeceived him. ‘I am afraid it is not possible,’ she said firmly. ‘Indeed, I may say at once, Dr. Gregg, that what you ask is out of the question; though I thank you, I am sure.’

His face fell ludicrously. His thick black brows drew together in a very ominous fashion. But he still could not believe that she meant it. ‘I do not think you understand,’ he said, exerting himself to be patient, ‘that the house is ready, and the furniture and servants, and that there is nothing to prevent you stepping into it whenever you please. I will take you away from this,’ he continued, darting a scornful glance round the stiff, chilly room—‘I do not suppose that ten people enter this room in the twelvemonth—and I will show you something like life. It is an offer not many would make you. Come, Kate, do not be a little fool!

You are not going to say No, so say Yes at once. And don't let us shilly-shally !'

He had put out his hand as he spoke and captured hers. But she snatched it from him again almost roughly, and stepped back. The right man might have used the words the doctor used, and might have scolded her with impunity, but not the wrong one. Her face, perplexed and troubled a moment before, grew decided enough now. 'I am going to say No, nevertheless, Dr. Gregg,' she replied, raising her head and speaking with decision. 'I thought I had already said it. I will be as plain as you have been. I do not like you as a wife should like her husband, nor otherwise than as a friend.'

'A friend !' he exclaimed, gasping as a man does who has been plunged suddenly into cold water. His face was red with anger. His little whiskers bristled. His black eyes glared at her banefully. 'Oh, bother your friendship !' he added violently. 'I did not ask you for that !'

'I have nothing else to give you,' she replied coldly.

He gasped again. Refused by the Bonamy girl ! It was incredible. He had never thought of it as possible. He was beside himself with astonishment and anger, with disappointment and wounded pride. 'You would not have said this a month ago !' he sputtered at last. 'It was a pity I did not ask you then !'

'I should have given you the same answer.'

'Oh, no,' he replied with savage irony, swing-

ing his hat to and fro. 'Oh, no, you would not—not at all, Miss Bonamy. You would have sung to a very different tune if I had whistled to you before this niminy-piminy parson showed his face here! Do not think that I am such a fool as not to see which way the wind is blowing.'

She stood looking at him in silence. But her face was scarlet, and her hand shook with rage.

He saw it. 'Pooh! do not think to frighten me!' he said coarsely. 'When a man has offered to marry you he has a right to speak his mind! It will be a long time, I warrant you, before your parson will have the same right to speak. He was very great with you once, but he has quite another set of friends now, and I have not heard of him offering to introduce you to them.'

'Will you go, Dr. Gregg?' she cried passionately, pointing to the door. His taunts were torture to her, his every look an insult. 'Will you go, or do you wish to stay and insult me further?'

'I wish to say one thing, and I am going to say it,' he replied, nodding triumphantly. 'You are pretty proud of your capture, but you need not be. He will not be much of a match when we have stripped him of the living he has no right to and proved him the detected swindler he is! Wait! Wait a little, Miss Bonamy, and when your parson is ruined, as he will be before three months are out, high as he holds his head now, perhaps you will be sorry that you did not take my offer. Why,' he added scornfully, 'I should say you are the only person in the parish who does not know he

has no more right to be where he is than I have.'

'Go!' she said, pointing to the door. Her face was white now.

'So I will when I have said one more word——'

'You won't say it!' a sharp voice cried behind him. 'You will go now!'

He shot round, and there was Daintry with her hand on the door. Her hair was in disorder, her cheeks were flushed, her greenish-grey eyes were aglow with anger. He saw that she had overheard something of what had passed, and he began to tremble, for he had said more than he intended. 'You will go now, as Kate tells you,' she cried. 'I will not have——'

'Leave the room, child!' he snarled, stamping his foot.

'I shan't!' she retorted fiercely. 'And if you do not go before I count three I will fetch the dogs.'

Dr. Gregg made a movement as if he would have put her out of the room. But her presence had a little sobered him, and he stopped. 'Look here,' he said.

'One!' cried Daintry, who knew well that the doctor had a particular dislike for Snorum, and that the dog's presence was at any time enough to drive him from the house.

He turned and looked at Kate. She had gone to the window and was gazing out, her back to him, her figure proud and scornful. 'Miss Bonamy,' he said.

‘Two!’ cried Daintry. ‘Are you going, or shall I fetch Snorum?’

With a muttered oath he took up his hat and went down the stairs. He passed out into the street. Near the door he stood a moment, grinding his teeth, as the full sense of the calamity which had befallen him came home to him. He had stooped, and been rejected. He had been rejected by Bonamy’s daughter. He walked away, and still his anger did not decrease. But all the same he began to be a little thankful that the child had interrupted him. Had he gone on he might have said too much. As it was, he had an idea that perhaps he had said more than was quite prudent. And this had presently a wonderful effect in the way of sobering him.

CHAPTER XII

THE RECTOR IS UNGRATEFUL

NEEDLESS to say, tea-time at Mr. Bonamy's was half-past five; the lawyer knew nothing of four o'clock tea. He would have stared had he been invited into the drawing-room to take it, or had his daughters produced one of those dainty afternoon tea-tables which were in use at the Town House, and asked him to support his cup and saucer on his knee. Compromises found no favour with him. Tea was a meal—he had always so considered it; and he liked to have the dining-room table laid for it. Possibly Kate, had she enjoyed more of her own way, would have altered this, as she would certainly have reformed the drawing-room. But Mr. Bonamy, who was in many things an indulgent father, was conservative in some. Four o'clock tea, and a daily use of the drawing-room, were refinements which he had always regarded as peculiar to a certain class; and in his pride he would not appear to ape its ways or affect to belong to it.

Almost to the moment he came into the room, which was as bright and cheerful as gaslight and firelight could make it. Laying some letters under a

weight on the mantelshelf, he turned round, and stood with his back to the fireplace. 'How is the child?' he asked. 'Has she gone to bed?'

'Yes,' Kate answered, lifting the lid of the teapot and looking in, 'I think she will be all right after a night's rest.'

'You do not look very bright yourself, Kate,' he continued, as he sat down.

Her cheek flushing, she made the old old woman's excuse. 'I have a little headache,' she said. 'It will be better when I have had my tea.'

He took a piece of toast and buttered it deliberately. 'Gregg came and saw her?' he asked.

'Yes. He said it was only a sick-headache, and would pass off.'

The lawyer made no comment at the moment, but went on eating his toast. But presently he looked up. 'What is the matter, Kitty?' he said, not unkindly.

Her face burning, she peered again quite unnecessarily into the teapot. Then she said hurriedly, 'I have something I think I ought to tell you, father. Dr. Gregg has asked me—to marry him!'

'The deuce he has!' Mr. Bonamy answered. His surprise was unmistakable. For a moment he did not know what to say or how to feel about it. If anyone had informed the Claversham people that the lawyer's moroseness was not natural to the man, but the product of many slights, the informant would have lost his pains. Yet in a great measure this was so; and first among the things which of late years had exercised Mr. Bonamy, a keen anxiety

for his daughters' happiness had place. He had never made any move towards procuring them the society of their equals; nay, he had done many things in his pride calculated rather to prolong their exclusion. Yet all the time he had bitterly resented it, and had spent many a wakeful night in pondering gloomily over the dull lives to which they were condemned. Now—strange that he had never thought of it before—as far as Kate was concerned, he saw a way of escape opening. Gregg had a fair practice, some private means, a good house, a tolerable position in the town. In a word, he was perfectly eligible. Yet Mr. Bonamy was not altogether pleased. He had no fastidious objection to the doctor. It did not occur to him that the doctor was not a gentleman. But he did know that he did not like him.

So the lawyer, after one exclamation of surprise, was for a moment silent. Then he asked, 'Well, Kate, and what did you say?'

'I said No,' Kate answered in a low voice.

'He is a well-to-do man,' Mr. Bonamy remarked, slowly stirring his tea. 'Not that you need think of that only. But you are not likely to know many people who could make you more comfortable. I believe he is skilful in his profession. It is a chance, my girl, not to be lightly thrown away.'

'I could not—I could not marry him,' Kate stammered, her agitation now very apparent. 'I do not like him. You would not have me——'

'I would not have you marry anyone you do not like!' Mr. Bonamy replied, almost sternly.

‘But you are sure that you know your own mind?’

‘Quite,’ Kate said, with a shudder.

‘Hum! Well, well; there is no more to be said, then,’ he answered. ‘Don’t cry, girl.’

Kate managed to obey him. And in a moment, bravely steadying her voice, she asked, ‘What is this about Mr. Lindo, father? I heard that he had turned the sheep out of the churchyard.’

The lawyer thought she asked the question in order to change the subject; and he answered briskly, with less reserve perhaps than he might have practised at another time. ‘It is quite true,’ he said. ‘He is making a fool of himself, as I expected. You cannot put old heads on young shoulders. However, what has happened has convinced me of one thing.’

‘What is that?’ she asked in a low voice.

‘That he does not know himself that he has no right here.’

‘No right here?’ she murmured, in the same tone. ‘But has he none?’ Her father noticed that her manner was conscious and embarrassed; but naturally he set this down to the former topic. He thought she was trying to avoid a scene, and he admired her for it.

‘Well, I doubt if he has,’ he answered, ‘though I am not quite sure that people have not happened upon a mare’s nest. It is the talk of the town that there was some mistake in his presentation, and there is a disreputable fellow hanging on his heels, and apparently living on him, who is said to be in

the secret, and to be making the most of it. I do not believe this last, however,' the lawyer continued, falling into a brown-study and speaking as much to himself as to her. 'For if he knew he were insecure he would live more quietly than he does. All the same, he is likely to learn a lesson he will not forget.'

'How?' she asked, her spoon tinkling tremulously against the side of the cup, and her head bent low over it, as though she saw something interesting in the lees.

Mr. Bonamy laughed in his out-of-door manner. 'How?' he said grimly. 'Well, if there be any mistake, he is going the right way to suffer by it. If he kept quiet, and went softly, and made no enemies, very little might be said and nothing done when the mistake came out. But as it is—well, he has made a good many enemies, and the chances are that he will lose the best berth he will ever get into. It will be bad for him, but the better for the parish.'

'Don't you think,' said Kate, very gently, 'that he means well, papa?'

Mr. Bonamy grunted. 'Perhaps so, but he does not go the right way to do it,' he rejoined. 'His good fortune has turned his head, and he has put himself into the hands of the Hammond set. And that does not do at Claversham.' The lawyer closed his speech with a harsh laugh, which said more plainly than any words, that it never would do while John Bonamy was churchwarden at Claversham.

‘It seems a pity,’ Kate ventured, almost under her breath. She had never raised her eyes from the tea-tray since the subject was introduced, and if her father had looked closely he would have seen that her very ears were scarlet. ‘Could you not give him a word of warning?’

‘I!’ said the lawyer, with asperity. ‘Certainly not! Why should I? What business is it of mine?’

Kate did not say, and her father, with another impatient word or two, rose from the table, and presently went out. She rang the bell mechanically and had the table cleared, and in the same mood turned to the fire and, putting her feet on the fender, began to brood over the coals, which were burning red and low in the grate.

Five times—five times only, counting the Oxford escapade as one, she had spoken to him; and they—‘they’ meant Claversham, for it was her chief misery to believe that the whole town was talking of her—had made this of it! They had noticed his attentions, and had seen them scornfully withdrawn when he learned who she was. Oh, it was cowardly of him. And yet, had he ever—had he really ever said a word or cast a glance at her which meant anything—which all the world might not have heard and seen? No, never, never, as far as she could remember. And then her anger changed its course and ran against Gregg. She felt that she could never forgive him. It was his evil imagination, his base suspicions, which had built it all up; and Mr. Lindo was no

more to blame—though she a little despised him for his weakness and conventionality—than she was herself.

It seemed most sad that he should be ruined because no one would say a word to warn him. Brooding over the fire, she felt a girl's pity for the man's ill-fortune. She forgot the last month, during which she had spoken to him but once—and then he had seemed embarrassed and anxious to be gone—and remembered only how frank and gay he had been in the first blush of his hopes at Oxford, how pleasantly he had smiled, how well and yet how quaintly his new dignity had sat upon him, and how naïvely he had shaken it off at times and shown himself a boy, with a boy's love of fun and mischief. Or, again, she remembered how thoughtful he had been for them, how considerate, how much at home in scenes new to them, with how lordly an air he had provided for their comfort. Oh, it was a pity—a grievous pity, that his hopes should end in such a disaster as Mr. Bonamy foretold! And all because no one would say a friendly word to him!

The next day was a wet day—a sleety, blustering winter day, and she did not go out. But on the following one, as the rector crossed the churchyard after reading the Litany, he saw Miss Bonamy passing his door. He fancied, with a little astonishment—for she had constantly evinced the same avoidance of intimacy with him which had at first piqued him—that, on seeing him, she slightly checked her pace so as to meet him. And, to tell

the truth, the rector was half pleased and half annoyed. He had hardened his heart and set his face to crush Mr. Bonamy. He had in his pocket a letter from the lawyer, warning him that, unless he altered his course, a writ would be served upon him. And a dozen times to-day he had in his mind called the churchwarden hard names. Yet he was not absolutely ill-pleased to see Miss Bonamy. He felt a certain excitement in the *rencontre* under the circumstances. He would meet her magnanimously ; and of course she would ignore the quarrel. He hated Mr. Bonamy for a puritanical old pettifogger ; but that was no reason why he should be rude to the lawyer's daughter.

He saw, when he was a few paces from her and had raised his hat, that her face expressed more embarrassment than seemed to be called for by the occasion. And naturally this communicated itself to him. 'I have not seen you for a long time,' he said mechanically, as he shook hands. Perhaps the worst thing he could have said under the circumstances.

She assented, however. 'No,' she said, sloping her umbrella behind her so as to keep off the wind and a half-frozen drizzle with which it was laden. And, as she did this, her eyes met his gallantly. 'But I am glad, Mr. Lindo,' she went on, 'that I have met you to-day, because I have something I want to say to you.'

On the instant he vowed within himself that it would be in bad taste, in the worst taste, if she referred to the quarrel or to parish matters. And

he answered very frigidly, 'What is that, Miss Bonamy? Pray speak on.'

She detected the change of tone, and for a second her grey eyes flashed. But she had come to say something. She had counted the cost, and nothing he could do should prevent her saying it. She had lain awake all night, torturing herself with imagining the things he would think of her. But she was not to be deterred by the reality. 'Do you know, Mr. Lindo,' she said steadily, 'what is being said of you in the town?'

'A good many hard things,' he answered half lightly and half bitterly. 'So I have reason to believe. But I do not think that they will affect me one way or the other, Miss Bonamy.'

'And so,' she answered with spirit, 'you will not thank anyone for telling you of them? That is what you mean?'

He was very sore, and her interference annoyed him excessively—possibly because he valued her good opinion. He would not deny the feeling she imputed to him. 'Possibly I do mean something of that kind,' he said stiffly. 'Where ignorance is bliss—you know.'

'Yet there is one thing,' she replied, 'being said of you in the town which I think you should be told, Mr. Lindo. Your friends probably will not hear it, or, if they do, they will not venture to tell you of it.'

'Indeed!' he answered. 'You pique my curiosity.'

'It is being commonly said,' she rejoined, look-

ing down for the first time, 'that you have no right to the living, and were appointed by some mistake, or—or fraud.'

He did not answer her at once. He was so completely taken by surprise that he stood looking at her with his mouth open. His first and better impulse was to laugh heartily. His second, and the one he acted upon, was to say in a very quiet way, 'Indeed! That is being said, is it? It is quite true I had not heard it. May I ask, Miss Bonamy, if you had it from your father?'

If his tone had been cold before, it was freezing now. But she was not to be daunted, and she answered with presence of mind, 'I heard from my father that that was the report in the town, Mr. Lindo. But I also heard him express his disbelief in the greater part of it.'

'I am much obliged to him,' the rector said through his closed teeth. 'He did not think I had been guilty of fraud, then?'

'No, he did not,' Kate muttered, her voice faltering for the first time.

'Indeed! I am much obliged to him.'

He had received it even worse than she had expected. It was terrible to go on in the face of such scorn and incredulity. But to stop there was to have done only evil, as Kate knew, and she went on. 'I have one more thing I wish to say, if you will permit me,' she continued, steadying her voice and striving to speak in as indifferent a manner as possible.

He bowed, his face hard and contemptuous.

The wind had shifted slightly, and, to protect herself from the small rain which was falling, she changed her position, so as to face the churchyard. He saw only her profile now. If he looked proud, involuntarily he remarked how proud she looked also—how pure and cold was the line of her features, softened only by the roundness of the chin. ‘I am told,’ she said in a low voice, ‘that the fewer enemies you make, and the more quietly you proceed, the greater will be the chance of your remaining when the mistake is found out. Pray,’ she said more sharply, for he had raised his hand, as if to interrupt, ‘have patience for a moment, Mr. Lindo. I shall not trouble you again. I only wish you to know that those who have cause to dislike you—I do not mean my father, there are others—feel that you are playing into their hands, and consider every disagreement between you and any part of the parish as a weapon to be used when the time comes.’

‘When the mistake is found out?’ he said, grimly repeating her words. ‘Or the fraud? But I forgot—Mr. Bonamy does not believe in that!’

‘You understand me, I think,’ she said, ignoring the latter part of his speech.

‘And may I ask,’ he continued, his eyes on her face, ‘who my ill-wishers are?’

‘I do not think their names are material,’ she answered.

‘Then, at least, why am I indebted to you for this warning?’

His tone as he asked the question was as con-

temptuous as before. Yet Kate felt that this she must answer. To refuse to answer it, or to evade it, would be to lay herself open to surmises of all kinds.

‘I thought it a pity that you should fall into a trap unwarned,’ she answered, looking steadily away at the yew-trees. ‘And it seemed to me that, for several reasons, your friends were not likely to warn you.’

‘There I quite agree with you,’ he retorted quickly. ‘My friends would not have believed the story.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she said, outwardly unmoved.

‘I am astonished that you did! I am astonished that you should have believed anything so absurd, Miss Bonamy!’ he said, looking at her severely. And then he stopped, for at that moment, as it happened, two people came round the flank of the church. The one was the curate; the other was Dr. Gregg. Kate looked at them, and her face flamed. The rector looked, and felt only relief. They would afford him an excuse to be gone. ‘Ah, there is Mr. Clode,’ he said, lapsing into cool indifference. ‘I was just looking for him. I think, if you will excuse me, Miss Bonamy, I will seize the opportunity of speaking to him now.’ And raising his hat with a formality which the doctor took to be a pretence and a sham, he left her and walked across to them.

CHAPTER XIII

LAURA'S PROVISIO

WHEN a mine has been laid, and the fuse lit, and the tiny thread of smoke has begun to curl upward, it is apt to seem a long time—so I am told by those who have stood and watched such things—before the stones and earth fly into the air. So it seemed to Stephen Clode. The curate looked to see an explosion follow immediately upon the rector taking the decisive step of turning out the sheep. But week after week elapsed, until Christmas was some time gone, and nothing happened. Mr. Bonamy, with a lawyer's prudence, wrote another letter, and for a while, perhaps out of regard to the season, held his hand. There was talk of Lord Dynmore's return, but no sign of it as yet. And Dr. Gregg snapped and snarled among his intimates, but in public was pretty quiet.

It was noticeable, however, that the rector was invited to none of the whist-parties which were a feature of the town life at this season; and to those who looked closely into things and listened to the gossip of the place, it was plain that the breach between him and the bulk of his parishioners

was growing wider. The rector was much with the Hammonds, and carried his head high—higher than ever, one of his parishioners thought, since a talk she had had with him in the churchyard. The habit of looking down upon a certain section of the town, because they were not quite so refined as himself, because they were narrow in their opinions, or because the Hammonds looked down upon them, was growing upon him. And he yielded to it none the less because he was all the time dissatisfied with himself. He was conscious that he was not acting up to the standard he had set himself on coming to the town. He was not living the life he had hoped to live. He visited his poor and gave almost too largely in the hard weather, and was diligent at services and sermon-writing. But there was a flaw in his life, and he knew it; and yet he had not the strength to set it right.

All this Mr. Clode might have observed—he was sagacious enough. But for the time his judgment was clouded by his jealousy, and in his impatience he fancied that the rector's troubles were passing away. Each visit Lindo paid to the Town House, each time his name was coupled with Laura Hammond's, as people were beginning to couple it, chafed the curate's sore afresh and kept it raw. So much so that even Stephen Clode's self-restraint and command of temper began to fail him; and more than once he said sharp things to his commanding-officer, which made Lindo open his eyes in unaffected surprise.

Clode began to feel, indeed, that the position was becoming intolerable; and though he had long ago determined that the waiting-game was the one he ought to play, he presently—in the first week of the new year—changed his mind.

Lindo had announced his intention of devoting the afternoon—it was Wednesday—to his district; and, taking advantage of this, the curate thought he might indulge himself in a call at the Town House without fear of unpleasant interruption. He would not admit that he had any other motive in going there than just to pay a visit; which he certainly owed. But in truth he was in a dangerous humour. And, alas! when he had been ushered along the thickly-carpeted passage and entered the drawing-room, there, comfortably seated in the half-light before the fire, the tea-things gleaming beside them, were Laura and the rector!

The curate's face grew dark. He almost felt that Lindo, who had really been driven in by the rain, had betrayed him; and he shook hands with Laura and sat down in complete silence, unable to trust himself to answer the rector's cheery greeting by so much as a word. It was all he could do to say 'Thank you' when Miss Hammond asked him if he would take tea. She, of course, saw that something was amiss, and felt not a little awkward between her two friends. The rector alone of the party remained ignorant and at his ease. He saw nothing, and went on talking. It was the best thing he could have done, only, unfortunately,

he had to do with a man whom nothing in his present mood could please.

‘I am glad you have turned up at this particular moment,’ he said. ‘For I want your opinion. Miss Hammond says that I am pauperising the town by giving too much away.’

‘If you are half as generous at our bazaar on the 10th,’ she retorted, ‘you will do twice as much good.’

‘Or half as much evil!’ he said lightly.

‘Have it that way if you like,’ she answered, laughing.

The curate set his teeth together in impotent rage. They were so easy, so unconstrained, on such excellent terms with one another. When Laura, who was secretly quaking, held out the toast to him and let her eyes dwell for an instant on his, he looked away stubbornly.

‘Were you asking my opinion?’ he said in a voice he vainly strove to render cold and dispassionate.

‘To be sure,’ said the rector, stirring his tea and enjoying himself. ‘Miss Hammond is not impartial, you see. She is biassed by her bazaar.’

If he had known the strong passions that were at work on the other side of the tea-table! But the curate had his back to the shaded lamp, and only a fitful gleam of firelight betrayed even to Laura’s suspicious eyes that he was not himself. Yet, when he spoke, Lindo involuntarily started, so thinly veiled was the sneer in his tone. ‘Well, there is one pensioner I think you would do well

to strike off your list,' he said. 'He does not do you much credit.'

'Who is that? Old Martin at the Gas House?'

'No, the gentleman at the "Bull and Staff"!'

replied the curate bluntly.

'At the "Bull and Staff"? Who is that?'

'Felton.'

For a moment the rector looked puzzled. He had almost forgotten the name of Lord Dynmore's servant. Then he coloured slightly. 'Yes, I know whom you mean,' he said, taken aback as much by the other's unlooked-for tone as by the mention of the man. 'But I did not know he lived at the "Bull and Staff." It is not much of a place, is it?'

'I should say that it was very nearly the worst house in the town!' retorted the curate.

'Indeed! I will speak to him about it.'

'I would speak to him about getting drunk too, if I were you!' Clode replied with a short laugh. 'He is drunk six days in the week; every day except Saturday, when he comes to you and pulls a long face over a clean neckcloth. He is the talk of the town!'

The rector stared; naturally wondering what on earth had come to the curate to induce him to speak so strongly. He was rather surprised than offended, however, and merely answered, 'I am sorry to hear it. I will speak to him about it.'

'Who is this person?' Miss Hammond asked hurriedly, turning to him. 'I do not think that I know anyone in the town of that name.' The subject seemed to be a dangerous one, but any-

thing was better than leaving the curate free to conduct the discussion.

The curate it was, however, who answered her. 'He is a *protégé* of the rector!' he said with a laugh which was openly offensive. 'You had better ask him, if you want to know.'

'He is a servant of Lord Dynmore, Lindo explained, speaking to her with studious politeness, and otherwise ignoring Clode's interruption.

'But why you find him board and lodging at the "Bull and Staff" free, gratis, and for nothing,' interposed the curate again and with the same rudeness, 'passes my comprehension!'

'Perhaps that is my business,' said the rector, losing patience at last.

Both men stood up. Laura rose, too, with a scared face, and stood gazing at them, amazed at the storm which had so suddenly arisen. The curate's height, as the two stood confronting one another, seemed to give him the advantage; and his dark, rugged face, kindling with long-repressed feelings, wore the provoking smile of one who, confident in his own powers, has wilfully thrown down the glove and is determined to see the matter through. The rector's face, on the other hand, was red; and, though he faced his man squarely and threw back his head with the haughtiness of his kind, his anger was mixed with wonder, and it was plain that he was at a loss to understand the other's ebullition or to know how to deal with it. There was a moment's silence, which Laura had not the presence of mind, nor the curate the will,

to break. Then the rector said, 'Perhaps we had better let this drop for the moment, Mr. Clode.'

'As you will,' replied the curate recklessly.

'Well, I do will,' Lindo rejoined, with some *hauteur*. And he waited, still standing erect and expectant; as if he thought that Clode could not do otherwise than take his leave.

But that was just what the curate had not the slightest intention of doing. Instead, with a cynical smile, he sat down again. His superior's eyes flashed with redoubled anger at this, which seemed to him, after what had passed, the grossest impertinence; but Mr. Clode in his present mood cared nothing for that, and made it very plain that he did not. 'Will you think me exacting if I ask for another cup of tea, Miss Hammond?' he said quietly.

That was enough to make the rector's cup run over. He did not wait to hear Laura's answer, but himself said, 'Perhaps I had better say good-evening, Miss Hammond.'

'You will not forget the bazaar?' she answered, making no demur, but at once holding out her hand.

There was a faint note of appeal in her voice which begged him not to be angry, and yet he was angry. 'The bazaar?' he said coldly. 'Oh, yes, I will not forget it.'

With that he took up his hat and went, feeling much as a man does who, walking along a well-known road, has put his foot into a hole and fallen

heavily. He was almost more astonished and aggrieved than hurt.

When he was gone there was silence in the room. I do not know whether Laura had been conscious, while the two men wrangled before her, that she was the prize of the strife, and so, like the maidens of old, had been content to stand by passive and expectant, satisfied to see the best man win; or whether she had been too much alarmed to interpose. But certain it is that, when she was left alone with the curate, she felt almost as uncomfortable as she had ever felt in her life. She tried to say something indifferent, but for once she was too nervous to frame the words. And Mr. Clode, instead of assisting her, instead of bridging over the awkwardness of the moment, as he should have done, since he was the person to blame for it all, sat silent and morose, brooding over the fire and sipping his tea. At last he spoke. 'Well,' he said abruptly, turning his dark eyes suddenly on hers, 'which is it to be, Laura?'

He had never spoken to her in that tone before; and had anyone told her that morning that she would submit to it, she would have laughed her informant to scorn. But there was a new-born masterfulness in the curate's manner which cowed her. 'I do not know what you mean,' she murmured, her face hot, her heart beating.

'I think you do,' he answered sternly, without removing his eyes from her. 'Is it to be the rector, or is it to be me, Laura? You must choose between us.'

She recovered herself with a kind of gasp. 'Are you not going a little too fast?' she said, trying to smile, and speaking with something of her ordinary manner. 'I did not know that my choice was limited to the two you mention. Or that I had to choose one at all.'

'I think you must,' was his only answer. 'You must choose between us.' Then, with a sudden movement, he rose and stood over her. 'Laura!' he said in a different tone, in a low, deep voice, which thrilled through her and awoke feelings and emotions hitherto asleep. 'Laura, do not play with me! I am a man. Is he more? Is he as much? I love you with all my being! He cares only to kill time with you! Will you throw me over because he is a little richer, a little higher for the moment, because I am the curate and he is the rector? If so—well, tell me, and I shall understand you!'

It was not the way she had thought he would end. The force, the abruptness, the almost menace of the last four words took her by surprise and subdued her afresh. If she had had any doubt before which of the two men had her liking, she had none now. She knew that Clode's little finger was more to her than Lindo's whole hand; for, like most women, she had a secret admiration for force, even when exercised without much regard to good taste. 'You need not speak to me like that,' she said, in gentle deprecation of his manner.

He stooped over her. 'Laura,' he said, 'do you really mean it? Do you mean you will——'

‘Wait, please!’ she answered, recovering a little of her ascendancy. ‘Give me a little time. I want to think something out.’

But time to think was just what he feared—ignorant as yet of his true position—to give her; and his face grew dark and sullen again. ‘No, he said, ‘I will not!’

She rose suddenly. ‘You will do as I ask you now,’ she said, asserting herself bravely, ‘or I shall leave you.’

He gave way silently, and she sat down again. ‘Sit down, please,’ she said to him. He obeyed her. ‘Now,’ she continued, raising her hand so as to shade her eyes from the fire, ‘I will be candid with you. If I had no other alternative than the one you have mentioned—to choose between you and Mr. Lindo—I—I should certainly prefer you. No!’ she continued sharply, bidding him with her hand to keep his seat, ‘hear me out, please. You have not stated the case correctly, you see. In the first place—well, you put me in the awkward position of having to confess that Mr. Lindo has made no such proposal as you seem to fancy. And, secondly, there are others in the world.’

‘I do not care,’ the curate exclaimed, his deep voice trembling with exultation—‘I do not care though there be millions—now!’

She moved her hand, and for a second her eyes, full of a tenderness such as he had never seen in them before, met his. The look drew him from his seat again, but she waved him back to it with an imperious gesture. ‘I said I would be candid,’

she continued, 'and I intend to be so, though until a few minutes ago I never thought that I should speak to you as I am speaking.'

'You shall never repent it,' he answered fondly.

'I hope not,' she rejoined. But then she paused and was silent.

He sat waiting patiently for awhile; but, as she still said nothing, he rose. 'Laura,' he said.

'Yes, I know,' she answered, almost abruptly. 'But candour does not come very easily, sir, under certain circumstances. Don't you know you have made me afraid of you?'

He stepped forward, showing that he would have reassured her in a most convincing manner. But, notwithstanding her words, she had regained her power and presence of mind, and she repelled him. 'Wait until you have heard what I have got to say,' she continued. 'It is this. I would not marry Mr. Lindo because he is a rector with a living and a position—not though he were six times a rector! But all the same I will not marry a curate! No,' she added in a lower tone, and with a glance which intoxicated him afresh—'not though he be you!'

He stood silent, looking down at her, waiting for more. Neither by word nor gesture did he express dissent. It is possible he already understood, and felt with her.

'To marry a curate,' she continued in a low voice, 'is, for a girl such as I am, failure. I have held my head rather high, and I have stood by and seen other girls married. Therefore to marry

a curate, after all, would be the worst of failures. Are you very angry with me?' she continued quietly, 'or do you understand?'

'I think I understand,' he answered, with just a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

'And despise me? Well, you must. I told you I was going to be candid, and perhaps it is as well—as well, I mean, that you should know me,' she added, apparently unmoved.

'I am content,' he answered, catching her spirit.

'And so am I,' she said. 'To no one else in the world would I have said as much as I have said to you. To no other man would I say, "Win a living and I will be yours!" But I say it to you. Do as much as that for me and I will marry you, Stephen. If you cannot, I cannot.'

'You are very prosaic,' he replied, lapsing into bitterness again.

'Oh, if you are not content——' she retorted.

He did not let her finish the sentence. 'You will marry me on the day I obtain a living?' he asked.

'I will,' she answered bravely.

She was standing up now, and he too—standing where the rector had stood an hour before. She let him pass his arm round her waist, but when he would have drawn her closer to him, and bent his head to kiss her, she hung back. 'No,' she said, blushing hotly, 'I think'—with a shy laugh—'that you are making too certain, sir.'

'Do you wish me *not* to succeed?' he replied,

looking down at her ; and it must be confessed the lover's *rôle* became him better than nine-tenths of those who knew his dark, rugged face would have believed.

She shook her head, smiling.

‘ Then if you wish me success,’ he replied, ‘ you must send me out with some guerdon of your favour ’ ; and this time she did not resist. He drew her to him and kissed her thrice. Then she escaped from him and took refuge on the other side of the fireplace.

‘ You must not do that again,’ she said, biting her lip and trying to look at him reproachfully. ‘ At any rate, you have had your guerdon now. When you come back a victor I will crown you, but until then we are friends only. You understand, sir ? ’

And, though he demurred, he presently said he understood.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LETTERS IN THE CUPBOARD

WHEN Clode left the Town House after his interview with Laura he was in a state of exaltation—lifted completely out of his ordinary cool and calculating self by what had happened. It was raining, but he had gone some distance before he remarked it; and even then he did not at once put up his umbrella, but strode along through the darkness, his thoughts in a whirl of triumph and excitement. The crisis had come suddenly, but he had not been found unequal to it. He had gone in through the gates despondent, and come out in joy. He had pitted himself against his rival, and had had the best of it. He had wooed, and, almost in spite of his mistress, had won!

He did not for the first few moments consider the consequences. His altercation with the rector might have, he knew, unpleasant results, but he did not yet trouble himself about them, or about the manner in which he was to do Laura's bidding. Such considerations would come later—with the reaction. For the present they did not occur to him. It was enough that Laura might be his—that she never could be the rector's.

He felt the need, in his present excited mood, of someone to speak to, and instead of turning into his own lodgings he passed on to the reading-room, a large, barely-furnished room, looking upon the top of the town, and used as a club by the leading townsfolk and a few of the local magnates who lived near. He entered it, and, to his surprise, found the archdeacon seated under the naked gas-burners, interested in the 'Times.' The sight filled him with astonishment, for it was seldom the county members used the room after sunset.

'You are the last person I expected to see,' he said—his tongue naturally hung loose at the moment, and a *bonhomie*, difficult to assume at another time, came easily to him now. 'What in the world brings you here at this hour?'

The archdeacon laid down his paper. 'Upon my word, I think I was half asleep,' he said. 'I am here for the "Free Foresters"' supper. I thought the hour was half-past six, and came into town accordingly, whereas I find it is half-past seven. I have been here the best part of three-quarters of an hour, killing time.'

'But I thought that the rector always said grace for the "Free Foresters,"' the curate answered, in some surprise.

'It has been the custom for them to ask him,' the archdeacon replied cautiously. 'By the way, you did it last year, did you not?'

'Yes, for Mr. Williams. He was confined to his room.'

‘I thought so. Well, this year these foolish people seem to have taken a fancy not to have the rector, and they came to me. I tried to persuade them to have him, but it was no good. And so,’ the archdeacon added, lowering his tone, ‘I thought it would look less like a slight if I came than if any other clergyman—you, for instance—were the clerical guest.’

‘To be sure,’ the curate said warmly. ‘It was most thoughtful of you.’

The archdeacon hitched his chair slightly nearer the fire. He felt the influence of the curate’s sympathy. The latter had said little, but his manner warmed the old gentleman’s heart, and his tongue also grew more loose. ‘I wonder whether you know,’ he said genially, rubbing his hands up and down his knees, which he was gently toasting, and looking benevolently at his companion, ‘how near you were to having the living, Clode?’

‘Do you mean Claversham?’ the curate replied, experiencing a kind of shock at this reference to the subject so near his heart.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I never thought I had a chance of it!’

‘You had so good a chance,’ the archdeacon answered, nodding his head wisely, ‘that only one thing stood between you and it.’

‘May I ask what that was?’ the curate rejoined his heart beating faster.

‘A promise. The earl promised his old friend that he should have this living. Lord Dynmore told me so himself, the last time I saw him. That

would be nearly a year ago, when poor Williams was already ailing.'

'Well, I supposed that to be the case,' Clode answered, his tone one of disappointment. He had expected to hear more than this. 'But I do not quite see how I was affected by it—more, I mean, than others, archdeacon,' he continued.

'That is what I was going to tell you, only it must not go further,' the archdeacon answered genially. 'Lord Dynmore told me of this promise in connection with a resolution he had just come to—namely, that he would in future give his livings (he has seven in all, you know) to the curate, wherever the latter had been two years at least in the parish, and stood well with it. I am not sure that I agree with him; but he is a conscientious man, though an odd one, and he had formed the opinion that that was the right course. So, now, if anything should happen to Lindo, you would drop into it. And I am not sure,' the archdeacon added confidentially, 'though no one likes Lindo more than I do, that yours would not have been the better appointment.'

The curate disclaimed this so warmly and loyally that the archdeacon was more than ever pleased with him; and, half-past seven striking, they parted at the door of the reading-room on the best of terms with one another. The archdeacon crossed to his supper and speech, and the curate turned into his rooms, and, throwing himself into the big leathern chair before the fire, fixed his eyes on the glowing coals, and began to think—to apply

what he had just heard to what he had known before.

A living? He was bound to get a living. And without capital to invest in one, or the favour of a patron, how was it to be done? The bishop? He had no claim there. He had not been long enough in the diocese, nor did he know anything of the bishop's wife. There was only one living he could get, only one living upon which he had a claim, and that was Claversham. It all came back to that—with this added, that he had now a stronger motive than ever for ejecting Lindo from it, and the absolute knowledge to boot that, Lindo ejected, he would be his successor.

Stephen Clode's face grew dark and gloomy as he reached this stage in his reflections. He believed, or thought he believed, that the rector was enjoying what he had no right to enjoy, but still he would fain have had no distinct part in depriving him of it. He would have much preferred to stand by and, save by a word here and there—by little acts scarcely palpable, and quite incapable of proof—do nothing himself to injure him. He knew what loyalty was, and would fain have been loyal in big things at least. But he did not see how it could be done. He fancied that the stir against the rector was dying out. Bonamy had not moved, Gregg was a coward, and of this matter of the 'Free Foresters' he thought nothing. Probably they would return to their allegiance another year, and among the poor the rector's liberality would soon make friends for him. Altogether, the curate,

as he rose and walked the room restlessly and with a knitted brow, was forced to the conviction that, if he would be helped, he must help himself, and that now was the time. The iron must be struck before it cooled. Something must be done.

But what? Clode's mind reverted first to the discharged servant, and he considered more than one way in which he might be used. There was an amount of danger, however, in tampering with him which the thinker's astuteness did not fail to note, and which led him presently to determine to leave Felton alone. Perhaps he had made as much capital out of him as could be made with safety.

From him the curate's thoughts passed naturally to the packet of letters in the cupboard at the rectory, the letters which he had once held in his hand, and which he persuaded himself would prove the rector's knowledge of the fraud he was committing. Those letters! They haunted the curate. Walking up and down the room, pishing and pshawing from time to time, he could not disentangle his thoughts from them. The narrow chance which had prevented him reading them before somehow made him feel the more certain of their value now—the more anxious to hold them again in his hands.

Were they still in the cupboard, he wondered. He had retained, not with any purpose, but in pure inadvertence, the key which he had mentioned to the rector; and he had it now. He took it from the mantelshelf, toyed with it, dropped it into his pocket. Then he took up his hat, and was going

abruptly from the room when the little servant who waited on him met him. She was bringing up his simple dinner. The curate's first impulse was to order it to be taken down and kept warm for him. His second, to resume his seat and eat it hastily. When he had finished—he could not have said an hour later what he had had—he took his hat again and went out.

Two minutes saw him arrive at the rectory-door, where he was just in time to meet the rector going out. Lindo's face grew red as he saw who his visitor was, and there was more than a suspicion of haughtiness in his tone as he greeted him. 'Good-evening,' he said. 'Do you want to see me, Mr. Clode?'

'If you please,' the curate answered simply. 'May I come in?'

For answer, Lindo silently held the door open, and Clode passed through the hall into the library. He was in the habit of entering this room a dozen times a week, but he never did so after leaving his own small lodgings without being struck by its handsome proportions, by the grave, harmonious colour of its calf-lined walls, and the air of studious quiet which always reigned within them. Of all the rector's possessions, he envied him this room the most. The very sight of the shaded lamp standing on the revolving bookcase at the corner of the hearth, and of the little table beside it, which still bore the rector's coffee-cup and a tiny silver ewer and basin, aroused his spleen afresh. But he gave no outward sign of this. He stood with his hat in

one hand, his other leaning on the table, and his head slightly bent. 'Rector,' he said, 'I am afraid I behaved very badly this afternoon.'

'I certainly thought your manner rather odd,' replied the rector shortly; and he stood erect and expectant. But he was half disarmed already.

'I was annoyed, much annoyed, about a private matter,' the curate proceeded in a low, rather despondent tone. 'It is a matter about which I expect I shall presently have to take your opinion. But for the present I am not at liberty to name it. However, I was in trouble, and I foolishly wreaked my annoyance upon the first person I came across.'

'That was, unfortunately, myself,' Lindo said, smiling.

'It would have been very unfortunate indeed for me if you were as some rectors I could name,' the curate replied gravely, still with his eyes cast down. 'As it is—well, I think you will accept my apology.'

'Say no more about it,' the rector answered hastily. There was nothing he hated so much as a scene. 'Have a cup of coffee, my dear fellow. I will ring for a cup and saucer.' And before the curate could protest his host was at the bell and had rung it, his manner the manner of a boy. 'Sit down, sit down!' he continued. 'Sarah, a cup and saucer, please.'

'But you were going out,' protested the curate, as he complied.

'Only to the post with some letters,' the rector explained. 'I will send Sarah instead.'

Clode sprang up again, a peculiar flush on his cheek, and a flicker as of excitement in his eye. 'No, no,' he said, 'I am putting you to trouble. If you were going to the post, pray go. You can leave me here and come back to me, if that be all.'

The rector hesitated, his letters in his hand. He might send Sarah. But it wanted a few minutes only of nine o'clock, and he did not approve of the maids going out so late. 'Well, I think I will do as you say,' he answered, feeling that compliance was perhaps the truest politeness; 'if you are sure that you do not mind.'

'I beg you will,' the curate said warmly.

The cup and saucer being at that moment brought in, the rector nodded assent. 'Very well; I shall not be two minutes,' he said. 'Take care of yourself while I am away.'

The curate, left alone, muttered to himself, 'No, no, my friend. You will be at least four minutes!' and he waited with his cup poised until he heard the outer door closed. Then he set it down. Assuring himself by a steady look that the windows were shuttered, he rose and, quietly crossing the room, as a man might who wished to examine a book, he stood before the little cupboard among the shelves. Perhaps because he had done the thing before he did not hesitate. His hand was as steady as it had ever been. If it shook at all, it was with eagerness. His task was so easy and so devoid of danger, under the circumstances, that he even smiled darkly, as he set the key in the lock, at the thought of the more clumsy

burglar whom he had detected there. He turned the key and opened the door. Nothing could be more simple. The packet he wanted lay just where he expected to find it. He took it out and dropped it into his breast-pocket, and, long before the time which he had given himself was up, was back in his chair by the fire, with his coffee-cup on his knee.

He might have been expected to feel some surprise at his own coolness. But, as a fact, his thoughts were otherwise employed. He was longing, with intense eagerness, for the moment when he might take the next step—when he might open the packet and secure the weapon he needed. He fingered the letters as they lay in their hiding-place, and could scarcely refrain from taking them out and examining them there and then. When Lindo returned, and broke into the room with a hearty word about the haste he had made, the curate's answer betrayed no self-consciousness. On the contrary, he rather underplayed his part, his eye and voice displaying for a moment an absence of mind which surprised his host. The next instant he was aware of this, and he conducted himself so warily during the half-hour he remained that he entirely erased from the rector's mind the unlucky impression of the afternoon.

By half-past nine he was back in his own room, at his table, his hat thrown this way, his umbrella that. It took him but a feverish moment to turn up the lamp and settle himself in his chair. Then he took out the packet of letters, and, untying the

string which bound them together, he opened the first—there were only six of them in all. This was the one which he had partially read on the former occasion—Messrs. Gearns & Baker's first letter. He read it through now at his leisure, without interruption, once, twice, thrice, and with a long breath laid it down again, and sat gazing, with knitted brows, into the shadow beyond the lamp's influence. There was not a word in it, not an expression, which helped him; nothing to show the recipient of the letter that he was not the Reginald Lindo for whom the living was intended.

The curate sat awhile before he opened the second, and that one he read more quickly. He dealt in the same way with the next, and the next. When, in a short minute or two, he had read them all and they lay in a disordered pile before him—some folded and some unfolded, just as they had dropped from his hands—he leaned back in his chair, and, folding his arms, sat frowning darkly into vacancy. There was not a word to help him in any one of them, not a sentence which even tended to convict the rector. He had been at all his pains for nothing. He had——

The sound of a raised voice asking for him below roused him with a start—roused him from the dream of disappointment. The hasty tread of a foot mounting the stairs two at a time followed; and so quickly that he had scarce time to move. In a second, nevertheless, he was erect, motionless, listening, his hand upon and half covering the letters. A hasty knock on the outside of his door,

and the touch of fingers on the handle, seemed at the last moment to nerve him to action. Then it was all but too late. As the rector—for the rector it was—came hurriedly into the room, the curate, his face pallid, and the drops of perspiration standing on his brow, swept the letters aside and drew a newspaper partly over them. ‘What—what is it?’ he muttered, stooping forward, his hands on the table, his eyes set in terror.

Lindo was too full of the news he had brought to observe the other’s agitation, the more as the lamp was between them, and his eyes were dazzled by the light. ‘What is the news? Why, what do you think Bonamy has done?’ he answered excitedly, as he closed the door behind him. He was breathing quickly with the haste he had made, and, uninvited, he dropped into a chair.

‘What?’ said the curate hoarsely. He dared not look down at the table lest he should direct the other’s eyes to what lay on it, but he was racked as he stood there by the fear lest some damning corner of the paper, some scrap of the writing, should still be visible. He felt, now it was too late, what he had done. The shame of possible discovery poured like a flood over his soul. ‘What is it?’ he repeated mechanically. He had not yet recovered enough presence of mind to wonder why the rector should have paid this untimely call.

‘He has served me with a writ!’ Lindo replied, his face hot with indignation, his lips curling. ‘At this hour of the night, too! A writ

for trespass in driving out the sheep from the churchyard.'

'A writ!' the curate echoed. 'It is very late for serving writs.'

'Yes. His clerk, who handed it to me—he came five minutes after you left—apologised, and took the blame for that on himself, saying he had forgotten to deliver it on leaving the office.'

'For trespass!' repeated the curate stupidly. What a fool he had been to meddle with those letters under his hand! Why had he not had a little patience? Here, after all, was the catastrophe for which he had been longing.

'Yes, in the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of Justice, and all the rest of it!' the rector replied; and then he waited to hear what the curate had to say.

But Clode had nothing to say, except 'What shall you do?' And that he said mechanically, and without interest.

'Fight!' replied Lindo briskly, getting up and approaching the table. 'That of course. It was about that I came to you. I do not think there is any lawyer here I should like to employ. Did not you tell me the other day you knew the arch-deacon's lawyers? Some people in Birmingham, I fancy?'

'Yes, I know them,' the curate answered with an effort. He had overcome his first fear, and, as he spoke, he looked down at the table, on which he was still leaning. His hasty movement had disordered his own papers, but none of the tell-tale

letters were visible so far as he could see. What, however, if the rector took up the newspaper? Or casually put it aside? The curate grew hot again and felt his knees shake, despite his great self-control. He felt himself on the edge of a precipice down which he dared not cast his eye.

‘Then can you give me their address?’ the rector continued.

‘Certainly!’ Clode answered. Indeed, he leapt at the suggestion, for it seemed to offer some chance of escape—a way by which he might rid himself speedily of his visitor.

‘Just write it down, that is a good fellow, then,’ said the rector, unconscious of what was passing in his mind.

The curate said he would, and tore off at random—the rector was pressing his hand on the newspaper, and might at any moment be taken with a fancy to raise it—the back sheet of the first stray note that came to his fingers, and wrote the address upon it. ‘There, that is it,’ he said; and as he gave it to Lindo—he had written it standing up and stooping—he almost pushed him away from the table. ‘That will serve you, I think. They may be trusted, I am told. The best thing you can do, I am sure,’ he continued, advancing so as to get between the other and the table, ‘will be to place the matter in their hands at once.’

‘I will write before I sleep!’ the younger clergyman answered heartily. ‘You cannot think how the narrowness and malice of these people provoke me! But I will not keep you now. I see you are

busy. Come round early in the morning, will you, and talk it over ? ’

‘ I will come the moment I have had breakfast,’ the curate answered, making no attempt to detain his visitor.

And then at last the rector went. Clode stood eyeing the newspaper askance until the other’s footsteps died away on the pavement outside. Then he swept it off and stood contemplating the half-dozen letters with abhorrence. He loathed and detested them. They had suddenly become to him the incubus which his victim’s body becomes to the murderer. The desire which had tempted him to the crime was gone, and he felt them only as a burden. They were the visible proof of his shame, his disloyalty, his dishonour. To keep them was to become a thief, and yet he shrank with a nervous terror quite new and strange to him from the task of returning them—of going to the study at the rectory and putting them back in the cupboard. It had been easy to get possession of them ; he had thought nothing of the risk of that. But to return them now seemed a task so thankless, and withal so perilous, that he quailed before it. With shaking hands he bundled them together and locked them in the lowest drawer of his writing-table. He would return them to-morrow.

CHAPTER XV

THE BAZAAR

BEFORE noon on the next day the service of the writ at the rectory had become known in the town ; and the course which the churchwardens had taken was freely canvassed in more houses than one. They had on their side all the advantages of prescription, however, while of the rector people said that there was no smoke without fire, and that he would not have become the subject of so many comments and strictures, and the centre of more than one dispute, without being in fault. There had been none of these squabbles in old Mr. Williams's time, they said. Tongues had not wagged about him. But then, they added, he had not aspired to drive tandem with the Homfrays ! The town had been good enough for him. He had not wanted to have everything his own way, nor thought himself a small Jupiter in the place. His head had not been turned by a little authority conferred too early, and conferred, if all the town heard was true, in some very odd and unsatisfactory manner.

To know that all round you people are saying

that your conceit has led you into trouble is not pleasant. And in one way and another this impression was brought home to the young rector more than once during these days; so that his cheek flamed as he passed the window of the reading-room, or caught the half-restrained sniggle in which Gregg ventured to indulge when in company. Nor were these annoyances all Lindo had to bear. The archdeacon scolded him roundly for placing the matter in the hands of the lawyers without consulting him. Mrs. Hammond looked grave. Laura seemed less friendly than a little time back. Clode's conduct was odd, too, and unsatisfactory. He was sometimes enthusiastic and loyal, ready to back up his superior as warmly as could be wished; and anon he would show himself the reverse of all this—sullen, repellent, and absolutely unsympathetic.

Altogether the rector was not having a very sunny time, although the heat of conflict kept him warm, and he threw back his blonde head and set his face very hard as he strode about the town, his long-tailed black coat flapping behind him. Little guessing what was being said, he hugged himself more than ever on the one thing which his opponents could not take from him. When all was said and done, he fancied, in his innocence, he must still be rector of Claversham. If his promotion had not brought him as much happiness as he had expected, if he had not been able to do in his new position all he had hoped, the promotion and the position were yet undeniable. Knowing so well all

the circumstances of his appointment, he did not give two thoughts to the curious story Kate Bonamy had told him. It did not create a single misgiving in his mind. He was sorry that he had treated her so cavalierly, and more than once he thought with regret almost tender of the girl and the interview. But, for the rest, he treated it as the ignorant invention of the enemy. Possibly on the strength of certain 'Varsity prejudices he was a little too prone to exaggerate the ignorance of Claversham.

On the day before the bazaar a visitor arrived in Claversham. The stranger was a small, dark, sharp-featured man, with a peculiarly alert manner, whom the reader will remember to have met in the Temple. Jack Smith, for he it was—we parted from him last at Euston Station—may have come over on his own motion, or acting upon a hint from Mr. Bonamy, who since the refusal of Gregg's offer had thought more and more of the future which lay before his girls. The dark, quiet house had seemed more and more dull, not to him in his own person, but to him considering it in the night-watches through their eyes. Hitherto the lawyer had not encouraged the young Londoner's visits, perhaps because he dreaded the changes of various kinds which he might be forced to make. But now, whether he had given him a hint to come or not, he received him with undoubted cordiality.

Almost the first question Jack asked, Daintry hanging over the back of his chair and Kate smil-

ing in more subdued radiance opposite him, was about his friend, the rector. Fortunately, Mr. Bonamy was not in the room. 'And how about Lindo?' he asked. 'Have you seen much of him, Kate?'

'No, we have not seen much of him,' she answered, getting up to put something straight which was not greatly awry before.

'Father has, though,' Daintry explained, nodding her head seriously.

'Oh, he has, has he?'

'Yes, he has served him with a writ.'

Jack whistled, as much in annoyance as surprise. 'A writ!' he exclaimed. 'What about?'

'About the sheep in the churchyard. Mr. Lindo turned them out,' Kate explained hurriedly, as if she wished to hear no more upon the subject.

But Jack was curious; and gradually he drew from them the story of the rector's iniquities, and acquired, as well, a pretty correct notion of the state of things in the parish.

He whistled still more seriously then. 'It seems to me that the old man has been putting his foot in it here,' he said.

'He has,' Daintry answered solemnly, nodding any number of times. 'No end!'

'And yet he is the very best of fellows,' Jack replied, rubbing his short black hair in honest vexation. 'Don't you like him?'

'I did,' said Daintry, speaking for both of them.

'And you do not now?'

The child reddened, and rubbed herself shyly against Kate's chair. 'Well, not so much!' she murmured, Jack's eyes upon her. 'He is too big a swell for us.'

'Oh, that is it, is it?' Jack said contemptuously.

He pressed the matter no further, and appeared to have forgotten the subject; but presently, when he was alone with Kate, he recurred to it. 'So Lindo has been putting on airs, has he?' he observed. 'Yet I thought when Daintry wrote to me, after you left us, that she seemed to like him.'

'He was very kind and pleasant to us on our journey,' Kate answered, compelling herself to speak with indifference. 'But—well, you know, my father and he have not got on well; so, of course, we have seen little of him lately.'

'Oh, that is all, is it?' Jack answered, moving restlessly in his chair.

'That is all,' said Kate quietly.

This seemed to satisfy Jack, for at tea he surprised her—and as for Daintry, she fairly leapt in her seat—by calmly announcing that he proposed to call on the rector in the course of the evening. 'You have no objection, sir, I hope,' he said, coolly looking across at his host. 'He has been a friend of mine for years, and though I hear you and he are at odds at present, it seems to me that that need not make mischief between us.'

'N—no,' said Mr. Bonamy, slowly. 'I do not see why it should.'

Nevertheless, the lawyer was greatly astonished. He had heard that Jack and Mr. Lindo were acquainted, but he had thought nothing of it. It is possible that this discovery of something more than acquaintance existing between the two led him to take new views of the rector, for after a pause he continued, 'I dare say in private he is not an objectionable man, now?'

'Quite the reverse, I should say!' Jack answered stoutly.

'You have known him for some time?'

'For a long time, and very well.'

'Umph! Then it seems to me it is a pity he does not confine himself to private life,' the lawyer concluded with a characteristic touch. 'As a rector I do not like him!'

'I am sorry for that,' Jack answered cheerfully. 'But I have not known much of him as a rector, you see, sir; though indeed, as it happens, he brought the offer of the living straight to me, and I was the first person who congratulated him on his promotion.'

Mr. Bonamy lifted his eyes slowly from the teacup he was raising to his lips, and looked fixedly at his visitor, his face wearing an expression much resembling strong curiosity. If a question was on the tip of his tongue he refrained from putting it, however, and Jack, who by no means wished to hear the tale of his friend's shortcomings repeated, said no more until they rose from the table. Then he remarked, 'Lindo dines late, I expect?'

He put the question to Kate, but the lawyer

answered it. 'Oh yes, he does everything which is fashionable,' he said drily. And Jack, putting this and that together, began to see still more clearly how the land lay, and on what shoals his friend had wrecked his popularity.

About half-past eight he went to the rectory, but found that Lindo was not at home. The door was opened to him, however, by Mrs. Baxter, who had often seen the barrister in the East India Dock Road, and knew him well; and she pressed him to walk in and wait. 'He dined at home, sir,' she explained. 'I think he has only slipped out for a few minutes. I am sure he would wish you to wait.'

He followed her accordingly across the panelled hall to the study, where for a moment a whimsical smile played upon his face as he viewed its spacious comfort. The curtains were drawn, the fire was burning redly, and the lamp was turned half down. The housekeeper made as if she would have turned it up, but he prevented her. 'I like it as it is,' he said genially. 'This is better than No. 383, Mrs. Baxter?'

'Well, sir,' she answered, looking round with an air of modest proprietorship, 'it is a bit more like.'

'What would you have?' he asked, laughing. 'The bishop's palace?'

'We may come to that in time, sir,' she answered, folding her arms demurely. 'But I do not know that I would wish it! He has a peck of troubles now, and there would be more in a palace, I doubt.'

‘I agree with you,’ Jack replied, laughing. ‘Troubles come thick about an apron, Mrs. Baxter.’

‘Ay, the men see to that!’ the good lady retorted. And, having got the last word, she went away delighted.

Left alone, Jack lay back in an arm-chair, and, nursing his hat, wondered what Mrs. Baxter would say when she discovered his connection with the Bonamys. From this his thoughts passed to Kate, but he had not been seated musing two minutes before he heard the door of the house open and shut, and a man’s tread cross the hall. The next moment the study-door opened, and a tall man appeared at it, and stood holding it and looking into the room. The hall-lamp was behind the newcomer, and Jack, seeing that he was not the rector, sat still.

The stranger seemed to be satisfying himself that the room was empty, for after pausing a moment, he stepped in and closed the door behind him; and, rapidly crossing the floor, stood before one of the bookcases. He took something—a key Jack judged by what followed—from his pocket, and with it he swiftly threw open a cupboard among the books.

There was nothing remarkable in the action; but the stranger’s manner was so hurried and nervous, that the looker-on leaned forward, curious to learn what he was about. He expected to see him take something from the cupboard. Instead, the man appeared to put something in. What it

was, however, Jack could not discern, for, leaning forward too far in his anxiety to do so, he upset his hat with some noise on to the floor.

The man started on the instant as if he had been subjected to a galvanic shock, and, turning, stood gazing in the direction of the noise. Jack heard him draw in his breath with the sharp sound of sudden fear, and even by that light could see that his face was drawn and white. The barrister rose quietly in the gloom, the stranger at sight of him leaning back against the bookcase as if his legs refused to support him. Yet he was the first to speak. 'Who is there?' he said, almost in a whisper.

'A visitor,' Jack answered simply. 'I have been waiting to see Mr. Lindo.'

The curate—for he it was—drew a long breath, apparently of relief; in reality, of such heartfelt thankfulness as he had never known before. 'What a start you gave me!' he murmured, his voice as yet scarcely under his control. 'I am Mr. Clode, Mr. Lindo's curate. I was putting up some parish papers, and thought the room was empty.'

'So I saw,' Jack answered drily. 'I am afraid your nerves are a little out of order.'

The curate muttered something which was inaudible, and, raising his hand to the bookcase, locked the cupboard door and put the key in his pocket. Then he went to the lamp and turned it up. At the same moment Jack, recovering his hat, advanced into the circle of light, and the two

men looked at one another. 'I am afraid if you wish to see the rector you will be disappointed,' the curate said, with something of hauteur in his voice, assumed to hide his suspicions. 'He was to spend the evening at Mrs. Hammond's. I doubt if he will be back before midnight.'

'Then I must call another time,' Jack said practically.

'If I see him first, can I tell him anything for you?' the curate persisted. Who was this man? Could he be a detective? The idea was preposterous, yet it occurred to him.

But Jack was so far from being a detective that he had dismissed the suspicions he had at first entertained. 'I think not, thank you,' he answered. 'I will call again.'

'Can I give him any name?' Clode asked in the last resort.

'Well, you might say Jack Smith called,' the barrister answered, 'if you will be so kind.'

They parted at the door, and Clode went back into the house, where he speedily learned all that Mrs. Baxter knew of Mr. Smith. It dispelled his first fear. The man was not a detective; still, it sent him home gloomy and ill at ease. What if so intimate a friend of the rector, as this Smith seemed to be, should tell him of his curate's visit to the cupboard, and the excuse which on the spur of the moment he had invented? It might go ill with him then. What explanation could he give? He tried to consider such a mishap impossible, or at all events unlikely; but not with complete success.

More than ever he wished that he had not meddled with the letters.

To return to Jack, whose presence was shedding gladness on the Bonamy household. Such mild festivities as the bazaar were not uncommon in Claversham, but the Bonamys had not been wont to look forward to them with anything approaching exhilaration. It is wonderful how children growing up in social shadow learn the fact. Daintry Bonamy, scarcely less than her sister, had come to regard the annual flower-show, the school sports, and the regatta with distaste and repugnance, as occasions of little pleasure and much humiliation. It was Mr. Bonamy's will, however, that they should attend, though he never went himself; and times innumerable they had done so, outwardly in pretty dresses and becoming hats, inwardly in sack-cloth and ashes.

Jack's presence changed all this, and for once the girls went up to dress quite gaily. If Kate reflected that Jack's intimacy with the rector would be likely to bring them also into contact with him, she said nothing; and from Jack—for the present at least—it was mercifully hidden that, with all his kindness, his unfailing good-humour, his wit, his devotion to her, his chief attraction in the girl's eyes lay in the fact that he was another man's friend.

When they entered the Assembly Room it was already well filled, the main concourse being about the two stalls at the end of the room over which the archdeacon's wife and Mrs. Hammond respec-

tively ruled. Here the great people were mainly to be seen ; and an acute observer would soon have discovered that between those who habitually hung about this end and those who surrounded the four lower stalls there was a great gulf fixed. Those on the one side of this examined the dresses of those on the other with indulgent interest, and, for the most part, through double eyeglasses ; while those on the other hand either returned the compliment and made careful notes, or looked about deferentially for a glance of recognition. The man who should have bridged that gulf, who should have been equally at home with Mrs. Archdeacon and the hotel-keeper's wife, was the rector. But the rector had heard on his entrance the unlucky word ' writ,' and he was in his most unpleasant humour. He felt that the whole room were talking of him—the majority with a narrow dislike, a few with sympathy. Was it unnatural that, forgetting his situation, he should throw in his lot with his friends, who were ever so much the pleasanter, the wittier, the more amusing, and present a smiling front of defiance to his opponents or those whom he thought to be such ? At any rate, that was what he was doing ; and no one could remark the carriage of his head or the direction of his eyes without feeling that there was something in the townsfolk's complaint that the new clergyman was above his work.

Jack and his party did not at once come across him. They found enough to amuse them at the lower end of the room—the more as to the barrister

the great and the little with whom he rubbed shoulders were all one. Strange to say, he did not discern any great difference even in their dress! With Daintry hanging on his arm and Kate at his side he was content, until, turning suddenly in the thick of the crowd to speak to the elder girl, he saw her face become crimson. At the same moment she bowed slightly to someone behind him. He looked round quickly, with a sharp, jealous pang at his heart, to learn who had called forth this show of emotion. He found himself face to face with the rector.

Lindo had looked forward to this meeting. He had prepared himself for it. And yet, occurring in this way, it shook him out of his self-possession. He coloured almost as deeply as the girl had coloured, and though he held out his hand without any perceptible pause, the action was nervous and jerky. 'By Jove! is it you, Jack?' he said, his tone a mixture of old cordiality and rising antagonism. 'How do you do, Miss Bonamy?' and he held out his hand to the girl also, who just touched it with her fingers and drew back. 'It is pleasant to see your cousin's face again,' he went on more glibly, yet clearly not at his ease. 'I was sorry that I was not at home last night when he called.'

'Yes, I was sorry to miss you,' Jack answered slowly, his eyes on his friend's face. He could not quite understand matters. His cousin's embarrassment had been almost a revelation to him, and yet it flashed across his mind now that the cause

of it might be only the quarrel between her father and the rector. The same thing would account for Lindo's shy, ungenial manner. And yet—and yet he could not quite understand it, and, whether he would or no, his face grew hard. 'You heard I had looked in?' he continued.

'Yes; Mrs. Baxter told me,' Lindo answered, moving slightly to let someone pass him; then glancing aside to smile a recognition.

'She looks the better for the change, I think.'

'Yes; she gets more fresh air now.'

'It does not seem to have done you much good.'

'No?'

Altogether it was rather pitiful. They were old, tried college friends, or had been so a few weeks back, and they had nothing more to say to one another than this! The rector's self-consciousness began to infect the other, sowing in his mind he knew not what suspicions. So that, if ever Daintry's interposition was welcome, it was welcome now. 'Jack is going to stay a week,' she said inconsequently, standing on one leg the while, with her arm through Jack's and her big eyes on the rector's face.

'I am very glad to hear it,' Lindo answered. 'He will find me at home more than once in the week, I hope.'

'I shall come and try,' said Jack stoutly.

'Of course you will!' the rector replied, with a flash of his old manner. 'I shall be glad if you will remind him of his promise, Miss Bonamy.'

Kate murmured that she would.

‘ You like your house ? ’ Jack said.

‘ Oh, very much—very much indeed.’

‘ It is an improvement on No. 383 ? ’ continued the barrister, rather drily.

‘ It is—very much so ! ’

The words were natural. They were the words Jack expected. But, unfortunately, Gregg at that moment passed the rector’s elbow, and the latter’s manner was cold and shy—almost as if he resented the reference to his old life. Jack thought he did, and his lip curled. Fortunately, Daintry again intervened. ‘ Here is Miss Hammond,’ she said. ‘ She is looking for you, Mr. Lindo.’

The rector turned as Laura, threading her way through the press, came smiling towards him. She glanced with some curiosity at Jack, and then nodded graciously to Kate, whom she knew at the Sunday-school, and through meeting her on such occasions as this. ‘ How do you do, Miss Bonamy ? ’ she said pleasantly. ‘ Will you pardon me if I carry off the rector ? We want him to come to tea.’

Kate bowed, and the rector took off his hat to the girls. Then he waved an awkward farewell to Jack, muttered ‘ See you soon ! ’ and went off with his captor.

And that was all ! Jack turned away with his cousins to the nearest stall, and bought and chatted. But he did both at random. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was a keen observer, and he had seen too much for comfort, yet not enough for comprehension. Nor did the occasional glance which

he shot at Kate's preoccupied face, as she bent over the woolwork and 'guaranteed hand-paintings,' tend to clear up his doubts or render his mood more cheerful.

Meanwhile the rector's frame of mind, as he rejoined his party, was not a whit more enviable. He was angry with himself, angry with his friend. The sight of Jack standing by Kate's side had made his own conduct to the girl at their last interview appear in a worse light than before—more churlish, more ungrateful. He wished now—but morosely, not with any tenderness of regret—that he had sought some opportunity of saying a word of apology to her. And then Jack? He fancied he saw condemnation written on Jack's face, and that he too, to whom, in the old days, he had confided all his aspirations and resolves, was on the enemy's side—was blaming him for being on bad terms with his churchwardens, and for having already come to blows with half his parish.

It was not pleasant. But the more unpleasant things he had to face, the higher he would hold his head. He disengaged himself presently—the Hammonds had already preceded him—from the throng and bustle of the heated room, and went down the stairs alone. Outside it was already dark, and small rain was falling in the dull streets. The outlook was wretched, and yet in his present mood he found a trifling satisfaction in the respect with which the crowd of ragamuffins about the door fell back to give him passage. With it all, he was someone. He was rector of the town.

At the Hammonds' door he found a carriage waiting in the rain. It was not one he knew, and as he placed his umbrella in the stand he asked the servant whose it was.

'It is Lord Dynmore's, sir,' the man answered, in his low, trained voice. 'His lordship is in the drawing-room, sir.'

CHAPTER XVI

‘LORD DYNMORE IS HERE’

LORD DYNMORE had arrived a few minutes only before the rector found his carriage at the door. Naturally enough, when he trotted at the heels of the servant into Mrs. Hammond’s drawing-room, his entrance, unexpected as it was, caused a flutter among those assembled there. Lords are still lords in the country. Mrs. Hammond’s sensations on seeing him were wholly those of pleasure. She was pleased to see him. She was still more pleased that he had chosen to call at so opportune a moment, when his light would not be hidden, and James had on his best waistcoat. And so she rose to meet him with a beaming smile, and a cordiality only chastened by the knowledge that Mrs. Homfray and the archdeacon’s wife were observing her with critical jealousy. ‘Why, Lord Dynmore,’ she exclaimed, ‘this is most kind of you!’

‘How d’ye do? how d’ye do?’ said the peer as he advanced. He was a slight, short man with bushy grey whiskers and grizzled hair which, being rather long, strayed over the fur collar of his overcoat. A noble aquiline nose and keen eyes helped

to give him, despite his short stature, an air of dignity. ‘How d’ye do? Why,’ he continued, looking round, ‘you are quite *en fête* here.’

‘We have been at a bazaar, Lord Dynmore,’ Laura answered. She was rather a favourite with him, and could ‘say things.’ ‘I think you ought to have been there too, to patronise it. We did not know that you were in the country, but we sent you a card.’

‘Never heard a word of it!’ his lordship replied positively.

‘But you must have had the card,’ persisted Laura.

‘Never heard a word of it!’ his lordship repeated. He had by this time shaken hands with everyone in the room. When the company was not too large he made a rule of doing this, thereby obviating the ill results of a bad memory and earning considerable popularity. ‘Archdeacon, you are looking very well,’ he continued.

‘I think I may say the same of you,’ answered the clerical dignitary. ‘You have had good sport?’

‘Capital! capital!’ replied the peer in his jerky way. ‘But it won’t last my time! In two years there will not be a head of buffalo in the States! By the way, I saw your nephew.’

‘My nephew!’ echoed the archdeacon.

‘Yes. Had him up to dinner in Kansas City. A good fellow—a very good fellow. He put me up to one or two things worth knowing.’

‘But, Lord Dynmore, you must be thinking of

someone else !' replied the archdeacon in a fretful tone. 'It could not be my nephew : I have not a nephew out there.'

'No ?' replied the earl. 'Then it must have been the dean's. Or perhaps it was old Canon Frampton's—I am not sure now. But he was a good fellow, an excellent fellow !' And my lord looked round and wagged his head knowingly.

The archdeacon's niece, a young lady who had not seen the peer before, nor indeed any peers, and who consequently was busily making a study of him, looked surprised. Not so the others. They knew him and his ways. It was popularly believed that Lord Dynmore could keep two things, and two only, in his mind—the head of game he had killed in each and every year since he first carried a gun ; and the amount of his annual income from the time of the property coming to him.

'There have been changes in the parish since you were here last,' said Mrs. Hammond, deftly intervening. She saw that the archdeacon looked a little put out. 'Poor Mr. Williams is gone.'

'Ah ! to be sure ! to be sure !' replied the earl. 'Poor old chap. He was a friend of my father's, and now you have a friend of mine in his place. From generation to generation, you know. I remember now,' he continued, tugging at his whiskers peevishly, 'that I meant to see Lindo before I called here. I must look him up by-and-by.'

'I hope he will save you the trouble,' Mrs. Hammond answered. 'I am expecting him every minute.'

'Capital! capital! He is a good fellow, now, isn't he? A really good fellow! I am sure you ought to be much obliged to me for sending you such a cheery soul, Mrs. Hammond. And he is not so very old,' the earl added, looking round him waggishly. 'Not too old, you know, Miss Hammond. Young for his years, at any rate.'

Laura laughed and coloured a little—what would offend in a commoner is in a peer pure drollery. And, as it happened, at this moment the rector came in. The news of the earl's presence had kindled a spark of elation in his eye. He had not waited for the servant to announce him; and as he stood a second at the door, closing it, he confronted the company, which he knew included his patron, with an air of modest dignity which more than one remarked. His glance rested momentarily upon the figure of the earl, who was the only stranger in the room, and whom consequently he had no difficulty in identifying; and he seemed to hesitate whether he should address him. On second thoughts, however, he decided not to do so, and advanced to Mrs. Hammond. 'I am afraid I scarcely deserve any tea,' he said pleasantly, 'I am so late.'

Laura, who had risen, touched his arm. 'Lord Dynmore is here,' she said in a low voice, which was nevertheless distinctly heard by all. 'I do not think you have seen him.'

He took it as an informal introduction, and turned to Lord Dynmore, who was leaning against the fireplace, toying with his teacup and talking to

Mrs. Homfray. The young clergyman advanced a step and held out his hand, a slight flush on his cheek. 'There is no one whom I ought to be better pleased to see than yourself, Lord Dymore,' he said with feeling. 'I have been looking forward for some time to this meeting.'

'Ah, to be sure,' the peer replied, holding out his hand readily, though he looked surprised, and was secretly completely mystified by the other's earnestness. 'I am pleased to meet you, I am sure. Greatly pleased.'

The listeners, who had heard what he had just said about his old friend the rector, stared. Only the person to whom the words were addressed saw nothing odd in them. 'You have not long returned to England, I think?' he observed.

'No; came back last Saturday night. And how is the rector? Where is he? Why does he not show up? I understood Mrs. Hammond to say he was coming.'

The archdeacon, Mrs. Hammond, all in the room, were dumb with astonishment. Even Lindo was surprised, thinking it very dull in the earl not to guess at once that he was the new incumbent. No one answered, and the peer, glancing sharply round, discerned that something was wrong—that, in fact, everyone was at a loss. 'Eh! Oh, I see,' he resumed in a different tone. 'You are not one of his curates? I made a mistake, I suppose. Took you for one of his curates, do you see? That was all. Beg your pardon. Beg your pardon, I am sure. But where is he?'

‘This *is* the rector, Lord Dynmore,’ the arch-deacon said in an uncertain, puzzled way.

‘No, no, no, no,’ replied the great man fretfully. ‘I mean the old rector—my old friend.’

‘He has forgotten that poor Mr. Williams is dead,’ Laura murmured to her mother, amid a general pause of astonishment.

He overheard her. ‘Nothing of the kind, young lady!’ he answered irritably. ‘Nothing of the kind. Bless my soul, do you think I do not know whom I present to my own livings? My memory is not so bad as that! I thought this gentleman was Lindo’s curate, that was all. That was all.’

They stared at one another in awkward silence. The rector was the first to speak. ‘I am afraid we are somehow at cross-purposes still, Lord Dynmore,’ he stammered, his manner stiff and constrained. ‘I am not my own curate because, if I may say so, I am myself—Reginald Lindo, whom you were kind enough to present to this living.’

‘To Claversham, do you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘And do you say you are Reginald Lindo?’ The peer straightened himself and grew very red in the face as he put the question.

‘Yes, certainly I am.’

‘Then, sir, I say that certainly you are not!’ was the startling answer. ‘Certainly you are not! You are no more Reginald Lindo than I am!’ the peer repeated, striking his hand upon the table by his side, and seeming to swell with rage. ‘What

do you mean by saying that you are, eh? What do you mean by it?’

‘Lord Dynmore——’

But Lord Dynmore would not listen. ‘Who are you, sir? Answer me that question first!’ he cried. He was a choleric man, and he saw by this time that there was something seriously amiss; so that the shocked, astonished faces round him tended rather to increase than lessen his wrath. ‘Answer me that!’

‘I think, Lord Dynmore, that you must be mad,’ the rector replied, his lips quivering. ‘I am as certainly Reginald Lindo as you are Lord Dynmore!’

‘But what are you doing here?’ the other retorted, raising his hand, and storming down the interruption which the archdeacon would have effected. ‘That is what I want to know. Who made you rector of Claversham?’

‘The bishop, my lord,’ answered the young man sternly.

‘Ay, but on whose presentation?’

‘On yours.’

‘On mine?’

‘Most assuredly,’ replied the clergyman doggedly—‘as the archdeacon here, who inducted me, can bear witness.’

‘It is false!’ Lord Dynmore almost screamed. He turned to the panic-stricken listeners, who had instinctively grouped themselves round the two, and appealed to them. ‘I presented a man nearly thrice his age, do you hear!—a man of sixty. Do

you understand that? As for this—this Reginald Lindo, I never heard of him in my life! Never! If he had letters of presentation, I did not give them to him. That is all I can say!’

The young clergyman’s eyes flashed, and his face grew hard as a stone. He guessed already the misfortune which had happened to him, and his heart was sore, as well as full of wrath. But in his pride he betrayed only the anger. ‘Lord Dynmore,’ he said fiercely, ‘you will have to answer for these insinuations. If there has been any error, the fault has not lain with me!’

‘Any error! Any error! An error, you call it, do you? Let me——’

‘Oh, Lord Dynmore!’ Mrs. Hammond gasped.

‘One moment, Lord Dynmore, if you please.’ This came from the archdeacon; and, though the other would have repulsed him, he persisted, placing himself between the two men, and almost laying his hands on the excited peer. ‘If there has been a mistake,’ he urged, ‘a few words will make it clear. I fully believe—nay, I feel sure, that my friend here is not in fault, whoever is.’

‘Ask your questions,’ grunted my lord, breathing hard, and eyeing the young clergyman as a terrier eyes the taller dog it means to attack. ‘He will not answer them, trust me!’

‘I think he will,’ replied the archdeacon with decision. His *esprit de corps* was rising. The earl’s rude insistence disgusted him. He noticed, his eyes wandering for a moment while he considered how he should frame his question, that

another person, Mr. Clode, had silently entered the room, and was listening with a darkly thoughtful face. It occurred then to the archdeacon to suggest that the ladies should withdraw ; but then, again, it seemed fair that, as they had heard the charges, they should hear what answer the rector had to make ; and he proceeded. ‘ First, Lord Dynmore,’ he said gravely, ‘ I must ask you whom you intended to present.’

‘ My old friend, Reginald Lindo, of course.’

‘ His address, if you please,’ the archdeacon continued rather curtly.

‘ Somewhere in the East End of London,’ the earl answered. ‘ Oh, I remember now, St. Gabriel’s, Aldgate.’

The archdeacon turned silently to the clergyman.

‘ He was my uncle,’ Lindo explained gravely. ‘ He died a year ago last October.’

‘ Died !’ The exclamation was Lord Dynmore’s.

‘ Yes, died,’ the young man retorted bitterly. ‘ Your lordship keeps a watchful eye upon your friends, it seems !’

The shaft went home. The earl caught a quick breath, and his face fell. The words awoke a slumbering chord in his memory, and recalled—not, as might have been expected, old days of frolic and sport spent with the friend whose death was thus coldly flung in his face—but a scene in another world. He saw in fancy a rock-bound valley, enclosed by hills which rose in giant steps to the snowy line of the Andes ; and in its depths a tiny hunter’s camp. He saw an Indian fishing in the brook, and near him a white man wandering away—

a letter in his hand. Then he remembered a shot, an alarm, a hasty striking of the tent, and for many hours, even days, a rapid, dangerous march. In the excitement the letter had been forgotten, to be recalled with its tidings—here, and now.

He winced, and muttered, 'By heavens, and I *had* heard it!'

The clergyman caught the words, and his resentment waxed hot. 'My uncle's death,' he resumed grimly, in the tone of one rather making than answering an accusation, 'occurred a year before the presentation was offered to me by your solicitors!'

'Lord help us!' said the peer in a helpless, bewildered tone. 'You are a clergyman, sir, I suppose?'

'That is a fresh insult, Lord Dynmore!' Lindo replied warmly.

'Hoity-toity!' my lord retorted, recovering himself quickly, 'you are a fine man to talk of insults! And you in my living without a shadow of title to it! You must have had some suspicion, sir, some idea that all was not right.'

'I think I can answer for Mr. Lindo there!' interposed the curate, stepping forward for the first time. His face was deeply flushed, and he spoke hurriedly, without looking up; perhaps, because all eyes were on him. 'When Mr. Lindo came here, I expected, for certain reasons, an older man. I heard by chance from him—I think it was on the evening of his arrival—that he had not long lost an uncle of the same name, and it occurred to me

then as just possible that there might have been a mistake. But I particularly observed that he was perfectly free from any suspicion of that kind himself.'

'Pooh! There is nothing in that!' the archdeacon replied snappishly.

'On the contrary, I think there is a great deal in it!' cried the earl in a voice of triumph. 'A great deal in it. If the idea occurred to a stranger, is it possible that the incumbent's own mind could be free from it? Is it possible, I say?'

'Is it possible,' the rector answered viciously, a ring as of steel in his voice, 'that a man who had his dear friend's death announced to him could forget the news in a year, and think of him as still alive?'

The earl gasped with passion. Never before had anyone addressed him in that way. By a tremendous effort he refrained from using bad words; he even forebore, in view of the alarmed looks of the ladies and the archdeacon's hasty expostulation, to call his opponent a villain or a scoundrel. He only stammered, 'You—you—are you going to give up my living?'

'No,' was the answer.

'You are not?'

'Certainly I am not!' the rector repeated. 'If you had treated me differently, Lord Dynmore,' he continued, speaking with his arms crossed and his lips set tight in contempt and defiance, 'my answer might have been different! Now, though the mistake has lain with yourself or your people,

you have accused me of fraud ! You have treated me as an impostor ! You have dared to ask me, though I have been ministering to the people in this parish for months, whether I am a clergyman. You have insulted me grossly, and, so doing, have put it out of my power to resign had I been so minded ! And you may be sure I shall not resign.'

He looked a very hero as he flung down his defiance. But the earl cared nothing for his looks.

'You will not ?' he stuttered.

'No ! I acknowledge no authority whatever in you,' was the answer. 'You are *functus officio*. I am subject to the bishop, and to him only.'

'Give me my hat,' the peer mumbled, turning abruptly away ; and, tugging up the collar of his coat, he began to grope about in a manner which at another time would have been laughable. 'Give me my hat, someone,' he repeated. 'Let me get out before I swear. I am *functus officio*, am I ? I have never been so insulted in my life ! Never, so help me heaven ! Never ! Let me get out ! *Functus officio*, am I !'

They made way for him in a kind of panic, and his murmurs died away in the hall, Mr. Clode with much presence of mind opening the door for him and letting him out. When he was gone, in the room he had left there was absolute silence. The men avoided one another's eyes. The women, their lips parted, looked each at her neighbour. Mrs. Homfray, the young wife of an old husband, was the first to speak. 'Well, I never !' she murmured. 'What an old bear !'

That broke the spell. The rector, who had stood gazing darkly, with flushed brow and compressed lips, at the hearthrug, roused himself. 'I think I had better go,' he said, his tone cold and ungracious. 'You will excuse me, I am sure, Mrs. Hammond. Good-night. Good-night.'

The archdeacon took a step forward, with the intention of intercepting him ; but thought better of it, and stopped, seeing that the time was not propitious. So, save to murmur an answer to his general farewell, no one spoke ; and Lindo left the room under the impression, though he himself had set the tone, that he stood alone among them ; that he had not their sympathies. He carried away this feeling with him, and it added to his unhappiness and to the pride with which he endured it. But at the moment he was scarcely aware of the impression. The blow had fallen so swiftly, it was so unexpected and so crushing, that he went out into the darkness stunned and bewildered, conscious only, as are men whom some sudden accident has befallen, that in a moment all was changed with him.

An hour later Mrs. Hammond and her daughter alone remained. The last of the visitors had departed, the dinner-hour was long past ; but they still sat on, fascinated by the topic, reproducing for one another's benefit the extraordinary scene they had witnessed, and discussing its probable consequences. 'I am sure, absolutely sure, poor fellow, that he knew nothing about it,' Mrs. Hammond declared for the twentieth time.

'So the archdeacon seemed to think, mamma,' Laura answered. 'And yet he said that probably Mr. Lindo would have to go.'

'Because of the miserable attacks these people have made upon him!' Mrs. Hammond rejoined with indignation. 'But think of the pity of it! Think of the income! And such a house as it is!'

'It *is* a nice house,' Laura assented, gazing thoughtfully into the fire, a slight access of colour in her cheeks.

'I think it is abominable!'

'Besides,' Laura said, continuing her chain of reflection, 'there is the view from the drawing-room windows.'

'Of course, it is too bad! It is really too bad! I declare I am quite upset, I am so sorry for him. Lord Dynmore ought to be ashamed of himself!'

'Yes,' Laura assented rather absently, 'I quite agree with you, mamma. And as for the hall, with a Persian rug or two it would be quite as good as an extra room.'

'What hall? Oh, at the rectory?'

'Yes.'

Mrs. Hammond rose with a quick, pettish air of annoyance. 'Upon my word, Laura,' she exclaimed, drawing a little shawl about her comfortable shoulders, 'you seem to think more of the house than of the poor fellow himself! Let us go to dinner. It is half-past eight, and after.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE LAWYER AT HOME

IF Mr. Clode, when he stepped forward to open the door for Lord Dynmore, had any thought beyond that of facilitating his departure—if, for instance, he anticipated having a private word with the peer—he was disappointed. Lord Dynmore, after what had happened, was in no mood for conversation. As, still muttering and mumbling, he seized his hat from the hall-table, he did indeed notice his companion, but it was with the red and angry glare of a bull about to charge. The next moment he plunged headlong into his brougham, and roared ‘Home!’

His servants knew his ways, and the carriage bounded away into the darkness of the drive, as if it would reach the Park at a leap. But it had barely cleared Mrs. Hammond’s gates, and was still rattling over the stony pavement of the Top of the Town, when the footman heard his master lower the window and shout ‘Stop!’ The horses were pulled up as suddenly as they had been started, and the man got down and went to the door. ‘Do you know where Mr. Bonamy the lawyer’s offices are?’ Lord Dynmore asked curtly.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Then drive there !’

The footman climbed to the box again. ‘What has bitten him now, I wonder ?’ he grumbled to his companion as he passed on the order. ‘He is in a fine tantrum in there !’

‘Who cares ?’ retorted the coachman, with a coachman’s fine independence. ‘If old Bonamy is in, there will be a pair of them !’

And Mr. Bonamy was in. In that particular Lord Dynmore had better luck than he perhaps deserved. Late as it was for business—it was after seven—the gas was still burning in the lawyer’s offices, illuminating the fanlight over the door and the windows of one of the rooms on the ground-floor—the right-hand room. The servant jumped down and rapped, and his summons was answered almost immediately by Mr. Bonamy himself, who jerked open the door, and stood holding it ajar, with the air of a man interrupted in the middle of his work, and bent on sending the intruder off with a flea in his ear. Catching sight of the earl’s carriage, however, and the servant murmuring that my lord wished to see him on business, the lawyer stepped forward, his expression changing to one of surprise.

The Dynmore business had been always transacted in London. In cases where a country agent became necessary the London solicitors had invariably employed a firm in Birmingham. Neither Mr. Bonamy nor the other Claversham lawyer had ever risen to the dignity of being concerned for

Lord Dynmore, nor could Mr. Bonamy recall any occasion in the past on which the great man had crossed the threshold of his office.

His appearance now, therefore, was almost as welcome as it was unexpected. Yet from some cause, perhaps the lateness of the hour, though that would seem to be improbable, there was a visible embarrassment in the lawyer's manner as he recognised him; and Mr. Bonamy only stepped aside to make way for him to enter upon hearing from his own lips that he desired to speak with him.

Then he opened the door of the room on the left of the hall. 'If your lordship will take a seat here,' he said, 'I will be with you in a moment.'

The room was in darkness, but he struck a match and lit the gas, placing a chair for Lord Dynmore, who, fretting and fuming and more than half inclined to walk out again, said sharply that he had only a minute to spare.

'I shall not be a minute, my lord,' the lawyer answered. And he retired at once, closing the door behind him, and went, as his visitor could hear, into the opposite room. Lord Dynmore looked round impatiently. He had not so high an opinion of his own importance as have some who are not peers. But he was choleric and accustomed to have his own way, and he thought that at least this local man whom he was going to patronise might receive him with more respect.

Mr. Bonamy, however, was as good as his word. In less than a minute he was back. Closing the

door carefully behind him, he sat down at the table. 'I am entirely at your lordship's service now,' he said, bowing slightly.

The earl laid his hat on the table. 'Very well,' he answered abruptly. 'I have heard that you are a sharp fellow, Mr. Bonamy, and a good lawyer, and that is why I have come to you—that and the fact that my business will not wait, and I have a mind to punish those confounded London people who have let me into this mess!'

That it was rather impatience than anything else which had brought him he betrayed by getting up and striding across the room. Meanwhile the lawyer, golden visions of bulky settlements and interminable leases floating before his eyes, murmured his anxiety to be of service, and waited to hear more.

'It is about that confounded sneak of a rector of yours!' my lord exclaimed, coming at last to a stand before the table.

Mr. Bonamy started, his visions fading rapidly away. 'Our rector?' he replied, gazing at his client in great astonishment. 'Mr. Lindo, my lord?'

'The man who calls himself your rector!' the earl growled. 'He is no more a rector than I am, and pretty fools you were to be taken in by him!'

'Now, that is odd!' the lawyer answered. He spoke absently, his eyes resting on the peer's face as if his thoughts had strayed far away.

'Odd or not,' Lord Dynmore replied, stamping on the floor with undiminished irritation, 'it is the

fact, sir! It is the fact! And now, if you will listen to me, I will tell you what I want you to do.'

The lawyer bowed again, and the earl proceeded to tell his tale. Passing lightly over his own forgetfulness and negligence, he laid stress on all the facts which seemed to show that Lindo could not have accepted the living in good faith. He certainly made out a plausible case, but his animus in telling it was so apparent that, when he had finished and wound up by announcing his firm resolve to eject the young man from his cure, Mr. Bonamy only shook his head with a doubtful smile. 'You will have to prove guilty knowledge on his part, my lord,' he said gravely.

'So I will!' cried the earl roundly.

Mr. Bonamy seemed inclined to shake his head again, but he thought better of it. 'Well, you may be right, my lord,' he answered. 'At any rate—without going further into the matter at this moment, or considering what course your lordship could or should adopt—I think I can do one thing. I can lay some information on this point before you at once.'

'What! To show that he knew?' cried the earl, leaning forward eagerly.

'Yes, I think so. But as to its weight——'

'What is it? What is it? Let me hear it!' was the impatient interruption. The earl was on his feet in a moment. 'Why, gadzooks, we may have him in a corner before the day is out, Mr. Bonamy,' he continued. 'True? I will be bound it is true!'

Mr. Bonamy looked as if he very much doubted that ; but he offered no further opposition. Begging Lord Dymore—who could not disguise his admiration, so much was he struck with this strange preparedness—to excuse him for a moment, he left the room. He returned almost immediately, however, followed by a man whom the earl at once recognised, and recognised with the utmost astonishment. ‘Why, you confounded rascal!’ he gasped, jumping up again, and staring with all his eyes. ‘What are you doing here?’

It was Felton. Yet not the same Felton whose surreptitious visit to the rectory had been cut short by Mr. Clode. A few weeks of idleness and drinking a month or two at the ‘Bull and Staff’ had much changed the once sleek and respectable servant. Had he gone to the rectory for help now, his tale would not have passed muster even for a moment. His coat had come to hang loosely about him, and he wore no tie. His hands were dirty and tremulous, his eyes shifty and bloodshot. His pasty face had grown puffy, and was stained with blotches which it was impossible to misinterpret. He had gone down the hill fast.

Seeing his old master before him he began to whimper ; but the lawyer cut him short. ‘This man, who says he was formerly your servant, has come to me with a strange story, Lord Dymore,’ he began.

‘Ten to one it’s a lie!’ replied the peer, scowling darkly at the poor wretch.

‘So I think likely!’ Mr. Bonamy rejoined with

a cough and the utmost dryness. 'However, what he says is this: that when he landed in England without a character he considered what he should do; and, remembering that he had heard you say that Mr. Lindo the elder, whom he knew, had been appointed to this living, he came down here to see what he could get out of him.'

'That is likely enough!' cried the peer scornfully.

'When he called at the rectory, however, he found Mr. Lindo the younger in possession. He had an interview with him, and he states that Mr. Lindo, to purchase his silence, as he supposes, undertook to pay him ten shillings a week until your return.'

'Phew!' my lord whistled in astonishment.

The servant mistook his surprise for incredulity. 'He did, my lord!' he cried passionately. 'It is heaven's own truth I am telling. I can bring half a dozen witnesses to prove it.'

'You can?'

'I can, my lord.'

'Yes, but to prove what?' said the lawyer sharply.

'That he paid me ten shillings a week down to last week, my lord.'

'That will do! That will do!' cried the earl in great glee. 'Set a thief to catch a thief—that is the plan!'

Mr. Bonamy looked displeased. 'Pardon me, but are you not a little premature?' he said with some sourness.

‘Premature? How?’

‘At present you have only this man’s word for what is on the face of it a very improbable story.’

‘Improbable?’ replied the peer quickly, but with less heat. ‘I do not see it. He says that he has witnesses to prove that this fellow paid him the money. If that be so, explain the payment if you can. And, mark you, Mr. Bonamy, the allowance stopped last week—on my arrival, don’t you see?’

The man cried eagerly that that was so. But the earl at once bade him be silent for the confounded rascal he was. Mr. Bonamy stood rubbing his chin thoughtfully and looking on the floor, but said nothing; so that the great man presently lost patience. ‘Don’t you agree with me, sir?’ he cried irascibly.

‘I think we had better get rid of our friend here before we discuss the matter, my lord,’ the lawyer answered bluntly. ‘Do you hear, Felton?’ he continued, turning to the servant. ‘You may go now. Come to me to-morrow morning at ten o’clock, and I will tell you what Lord Dymore proposes to do in your matter.’

The ex-valet would have demurred to being thus set aside; but the earl roaring ‘Go, you scoundrel!’ in a voice he had been accustomed to obey, and Mr. Bonamy opening the door for him, he submitted and went. The streets were wet and gloomy, and he was more sober than he had been for a week. In other words, his nerves were shaky, and he soon began, as he lounged homewards, to torment him-

self with doubts. Had he made the best of his story? Had he been wise to go to the lawyer at all? Might it not have been safer to make a last appeal to the rector? Above all, would Mr. Clode, whose game he did not understand, hold his hand, or play the trump-card by disclosing that little attempt at burglary? Altogether, Felton was not happy, and saw before him but one resource—to get home as quickly as possible and get drunk.

Meanwhile the lawyer, left alone with his client, seemed as much averse as before to speaking out. Lord Dymore had again to take the initiative. ‘Well, it is good enough, sir, is it not?’ he said, frowning impatiently on his new adviser. ‘There is a clear case, I suppose!’

‘I think your lordship had better hear first,’ Mr. Bonamy answered, ‘how your late servant came to bring his story to me.’ And then he proceeded to explain the course which the young clergyman had pursued in the parish from the first, and the opposition and ill-will it had provoked. He told the story from his own point of view, but with more fairness than might have been expected; though naturally, when he came to the matter of the sheep-grazing and the writ, he took care to make his own case good. The earl listened and chuckled, and at last interrupted him.

‘So you have been at him already?’ he said, grinning. ‘He is no friend of yours?’

‘No,’ the lawyer answered slowly. ‘I may say, indeed, that I have been in constant opposition to

him from the time of his induction. Felton (the man who has just left us) knew that, and it led him to bring his tale to me this evening.'

'When he could get no more money out of the parson !' the earl replied with a sneer. 'But, now, what is to be done, Mr. Bonamy ?'

Mr. Bonamy did not at once answer. Instead, he stood looking down, his face perturbed. His doubt and uneasiness, in fact, visibly increased as the seconds flew by, and still Lord Dynmore's gaze bent on him, at first in impatience and later in surprise, seemed to be striving to probe his thoughts. He looked down at the table and frowned as if displeased by the scrutiny. When at last he spoke, his voice was harsher than usual. 'I do not think, my lord,' he said, 'that I can answer that question.'

'Do you want to take counsel's opinion, then ?'

'No, my lord,' Mr. Bonamy answered curtly. 'I mean something different. I do not think, to put it plainly, that I can act for your lordship in this matter.'

'Cannot act for me ?' the earl gasped.

'I am afraid not,' Mr. Bonamy answered doggedly, a slight flush as of shame on his sallow cheek. 'I have explained, my lord, that I have been constantly opposed to this young man, but my opposition has been of a public nature and— and upon principle. I have no doubt that he and others consider me his chief enemy in the place. To that I have no objection. But I am unwilling that he or others should think that private interest

has had any part in my opposition, and therefore, being churchwarden, I would prefer, even at the risk of offending your lordship, to decline undertaking the business.'

'But why? Why?' cried the earl, between anger and astonishment.

'I have tried to explain,' Mr. Bonamy rejoined with firmness. 'I am afraid I cannot make my reasons clearer.'

The earl swore softly and took up his hat. He really was at a loss to understand; principally because, knowing that Mr. Bonamy had risen from the ranks, he did not credit him with any fineness of feeling. He had heard only that he was a clever and rather sharp practitioner, and a man who might be trusted to make things unpleasant for the other side. 'You are aware,' he said, turning at the door and looking daggers at the solicitor, 'that by taking this course you are throwing away a share of my work?'

Mr. Bonamy, wearing a rather more gaunt and grim air than usual, simply bowed.

'You will act for the other side, I suppose?' my lord snarled.

'I shall not act professionally for anyone, my lord!'

'Then you are a damned quixotic fool—that is all I have to say!' was the earl's parting shot. And, having fired it, he flung out of the room and in great amaze roared for his carriage.

A man is seldom so much inclined—on the surface, at any rate—to impute low motives to

others as when he has just done something which he suspects to be foolish and quixotic. When Mr. Bonamy, a few minutes later, entered his rarely-used drawing-room, and discovered Jack and the two girls playing at Patience, he was in his most cynical mood. He stood for a moment on the hearthrug, his coat-tails on his arms, and presently he said to Jack, 'I am surprised to see you here.'

Jack looked up. The girls looked up also. 'I wonder you are not at the rectory,' Mr. Bonamy continued ironically, 'advising your friend how to keep out of gaol!'

'What on earth do you mean, sir?' Jack exclaimed, laying down his cards and rising from the table. He saw that the lawyer had some news, and was anxious to tell it.

'I mean that he is in very considerable danger of going there!' was Mr. Bonamy's quiet answer. 'There has been a scene at Mrs. Hammond's this afternoon. By this time the story should be all over the town. Lord Dymore turned up there and met him—denounced him as an impostor, and swore he had never presented him to the living.'

For a brief moment no one spoke. Then Daintry found her voice. 'My goody!' she exclaimed, her eyes like saucers. 'Who told you, father?'

'Never you mind, young lady!' Mr. Bonamy retorted with good-humoured sharpness. 'It is true! What is more, I am informed that Lord

Dynmore has evidence that Mr. Lindo has been paying a man, who was aware of this, a certain sum every week to keep his mouth shut.'

'My goody!' cried Daintry again. 'I wonder, now, what he paid him! What do you think, Jack?' And she turned to Jack to learn what he was doing that he did not speak.

Poor Jack! Why did he not speak, indeed? Why did he stand silent, gazing hard into the fire? Because he resented his friend's coldness? Because he would not defend him? Because he thought him guilty? No; but because in the first moment of Mr. Bonamy's disclosure he had looked into Kate's face—his cousin's face, who the moment before had been laughing over the cards at his side—and with the keen insight, the painful sympathy which love imparts, he had read in it her secret. Poor Kate! No one else had seen her face fall or discovered her sudden embarrassment. A few seconds later she had regained her ordinary calm composure, even the blood had gone back to her heart. But Jack had seen and read aright. He knew, and she knew that he knew. When at last—but not before Mr. Bonamy's attention had been drawn to his silence—he turned and spoke, she avoided his eyes. 'That is rather a wild tale, sir, is it not?' he said with an effort, and a pale smile.

If Mr. Bonamy had not been a man of great shrewdness, he would have been tempted to think that Jack had been in the secret all the time. As it was, he only answered, 'I have reason to think

that there is something in it, wild as it sounds. At any rate, the man in question has himself told the story to Lord Dynmore.'

'The pensioner?'

'Precisely.'

'Well, I should like to ask him a few questions,' Jack answered drearily. But for the chill feeling at his heart, but for the knowledge he had just gained, he would have treated the matter very differently. He would have thought of his friend only—of his feelings, his possible misery. He would not have condescended in this first moment to the evidence. But now he could not feel for his friend. He could not even pity him. He needed all his pity for himself.

'I do not answer for the story,' Mr. Bonamy continued, little guessing, shrewd as he was, what was happening round him. 'But there is no doubt of one thing—that Mr. Lindo was appointed in error, whether he was aware of the mistake or not. I do not know,' the lawyer added thoughtfully, 'that I shall pity him greatly. He has been very mischievous here. And he has held his head very high.'

'He is the more likely to suffer now,' Jack answered almost cynically.

'Possibly,' the lawyer replied. Then he added, 'Daintry, fetch me my slippers, there is a good girl. Or, stay. Get me a candle, and take them to my room.'

He went out after her, leaving the cousins alone. Neither spoke. Jack stood near the corner

of the mantelsheff, gazing rigidly, almost sullenly, into the fire. What was Lindo to him? Why should he be sorry for him? A far worse thing had befallen himself. He tried to harden his heart, and to resolve that nothing of his suffering should be visible even to her.

But he had scarcely formed the resolution when his eyes wandered, despite his will, to the pale set face on the other side of the hearth. Suddenly he sprang forward and, almost kneeling, took her hand in both his own. 'Kate,' he whispered, 'is it so? Is there no hope for me, then?'

She, too, had been looking into the fire. She could feel for him now. She no longer thought his attentions 'nonsense,' as at the station a while back. But she could not speak. She could only shake her head, the tears in her eyes.

Jack waited a moment. Then he laid down the hand, and rose and went back to the fire, and stood looking into it sorrowfully; but his thoughts were no longer wholly of himself. He was a typical gentleman, though he was neither six feet high nor an Adonis. He had scarcely felt the weight of the blow which had fallen on himself, before he began to think what he could do to help her. Presently he put his thought into words. 'Kate,' he said, looking up, and speaking in a voice scarcely above a whisper, 'can I do anything?'

She made no attempt to deny the inference he had drawn. She seemed content, indeed, that he should possess her secret, though the knowledge of

it by another would have covered her with shame. But at the sound of his question she only shook her head with a sorrowful smile.

It was all dark to him. He knew nothing of the past—only that the faint suspicion he had felt at the bazaar was justified, and that Kate had given away her heart. He did not dare to ask whether there was any understanding between her and his friend ; and, not knowing that, what could he do ? Nothing, it seemed to him at first.

Then a truly noble thought came into his head. ‘I am afraid,’ he said slowly, looking at his watch, ‘that Lindo is in trouble. I think I will go to him. It is not ten o’clock.’

He tried not to look at her as he spoke, but all the same he saw the crimson tide rise slowly over cheek and brow—over the face which his prayer had left so pure and pale. Her lip trembled as she rose hurriedly, muttering something inaudible. Poor Jack !

For a moment self got the upper hand again, and he stood still, frowning. Then he said gallantly, ‘Yes, I think I will go. Will you let my uncle know, in case I should be late ?’

He did not look at her again, but hurried out of the room. It was a stiff, formal room, we know—a set, comfortless, middle-class room, which had given the rector quite a shock on his first introduction to it. But if it had united all the grace of the halls of Abencerrages to the stately comfort of a sixteenth-century dining-hall, it would have been no more than worthy of the man who quitted it.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED

I HAVE heard that the bitterest pang a boy feels on returning to school after his first holidays is reserved for the moment when he opens his desk and recalls the happy hour, full of joyous anticipation, when he closed that desk with a bang. Oh, the pity of it! The change from that boy to this, from that morning to this evening! How meanly, how inadequately—so it seems to the urchin standing with swelling breast before the well-remembered grammar—did the lad who turned the key estimate his real happiness! How little did he enter into it or deserve it!

Just such a pang shot through the young rector's heart as he passed into the rectory-porch after that scene at Mrs. Hammond's. His rage had had time to die down. With reflection had come a full sense of his position. As he entered the house he remembered—remembered only too well, grinding his teeth over the recollection—how secure, how free from embarrassments, how happy had been his situation when he last issued from that door a few, a very few, hours before. Such

troubles as had then annoyed him seemed trifles light as air now. Mr. Bonamy's writ, the dislike of one section in the parish—how could he have let such things as these make him miserable for a moment?

How, indeed? Or, if there were anything grave in his situation then, what was it now? He had held his head high; henceforward he would be a byword in the parish, a man under a cloud. The position in which he had placed himself would still be his, but only because he would cling to it to the last. Under no circumstances could it any longer be a source of pride to him. He had posed, involuntarily, as the earl's friend; he must submit in the future to be laughed at by the Greggs and avoided by the Homfrays. It seemed to him, indeed, that his future in Claversham could be only one long series of humiliations. He was a proud man, and as he thought of this he sprang from his chair and strode up and down the room, his cheeks flaming. Had there ever been such a fall before!

Mrs. Baxter, as yet ignorant of the news, though it was by this time spreading through the town, brought him his dinner, and he ate something in the dining-room. Then he went back to the study and sat idle and listless before his writing-table. There was a number of 'Punch' lying on it, and he took this up and read it through drearily, extracting a faint pleasure from its witticisms, but never for an instant forgetting the cloud of trouble brooding over him. Years afterwards he could recall some of the jokes in that 'Punch'—

with a shudder. Presently he laid it down and began to think. And then, before his thoughts became quite unbearable, they were interrupted by the sound of a voice in the hall.

He rose and stood with his back to the fire, and as he waited, his eyes on the door, his face grew hot, his brow dark. He had little doubt that the visitor was Clode. He had looked to see him before, and even anticipated the relief of pouring his thoughts into a friendly ear. Nevertheless, now the thing had come he dreaded the first moment of meeting, scarcely knowing how to bear himself in these changed circumstances.

But it was not Clode who entered. It was Jack Smith. The rector started, and, uncertain whether the barrister had heard of the blow which had fallen on him or no, stepped forward awkwardly, and held out his hand in a constrained fashion. Jack, on his side, had his own reasons for being ill at ease with his friend. The moment, however, the men's hands met they closed on one another in the old hearty fashion, and the grip told the rector that the other knew all. 'You have heard?' he muttered.

'Mr. Bonamy told me,' the barrister answered. 'I came across without delay.'

'*You* do not think I was aware of the earl's mistake, then?' Lindo said, with a faint smile.

'I should as soon believe that I knew of it myself!' Jack replied warmly. He was glad now that he had come. As he and Lindo stood half facing one another, each with an elbow on the

mantelshelf, he felt that he could conquer the chill at his own heart—that, notwithstanding all, his old friend was still dear to him. Perhaps if the rector had been prospering as before, if no cloud had arisen in his sky, it might have been different. As it was, Jack's generous heart went out to him. 'Tell me what happened, old fellow,' he said cheerily—'that is, if you have no objection to taking me into your confidence.'

'I shall be only too glad of your help,' Lindo answered thankfully, feeling indeed—so potent is a single word of sympathy—happier already. 'I would ask you to sit down, Jack,' he continued, in a tone of rather sheepish raillery, 'and have a cup of coffee or some whisky, but I do not know whether I ought to do so, since Lord Dynmore says the things are not mine.'

'I will take the responsibility,' the lawyer answered, briskly ringing the bell. 'Was my lord very rude?'

'Confoundedly!' the rector answered. And then he told his story. Jack was surprised to find him more placable than he had expected; but presently he learned that this moderation was assumed. For the rector rose as he went on, and began to pace the room, and, the motion freeing his tongue, he betrayed little by little the indignation and resentment which he really felt. Jack happened to ask him, with a view to clearing the ground, whether he had quite made up his mind not to resign, and was astonished by the force and anger with which he repudiated the thought of

doing so. 'Resign? No, never!' he cried, standing still, and almost glaring at his companion. 'Why should I? What have I done? Was it my mistake, that I am to suffer for it? Was it my fault, that for penalty I am to have the tenor of my life broken? Do you think I can go back to the Docks the same man I left them? I cannot. Nor is that all, or nearly all,' he added still more warmly—'I have been called a swindler and an impostor. Am I by resigning to plead guilty to the charge?'

'No!' Jack cried, catching fire himself, 'certainly not! I did not intend for a moment to advise that course, my dear fellow. I think you would be acting very foolishly if you resigned under these circumstances.'

'I am glad of that,' the rector said, sitting down with a sigh of relief. 'I feared you did not quite enter into my feelings.'

'I do thoroughly enter into them,' the barrister answered earnestly, 'but I want to do more—I want to help you. You must not go into this business blindly, old man. And, first, I think you ought to take the archdeacon or some other clergyman into your confidence. Show him the whole of your case, I mean, and——'

'And act upon his advice?' the young rector said, rebellion already flashing in his eye.

'No, not necessarily,' the barrister answered, skilfully adapting his tone to the irritability of his patient. 'Of course, your *bona fides* at the time you accepted the living is the point of importance

to you, Lindo. You did not see their solicitors—the earl's people, I mean—did you ?'

'No,' the rector answered, somewhat sullenly.

'Then their letters conveyed to you all you knew of the living and the offer ?'

'Precisely.'

'Let us see them, then,' replied Jack, rising briskly from his chair. He had already determined to say nothing of the witness whom Mr. Bonamy had mentioned to him as asserting that the rector had bribed him. He knew enough of his friend to utterly disbelieve the story, and he considered it as told to him in confidence. 'There is no time like the present,' he continued. 'You have kept the letters, of course ?'

'They are here,' Lindo answered, rising also, and unlocking as he spoke the little cupboard among the books ; 'I made them into a packet and indorsed them soon after I came. They have been here ever since.'

He found them after a moment's search, and, without himself examining them, threw them to Jack, who had returned to his seat. The barrister untied the string, and, glancing quickly at the dates of the letters, arranged them in order and flattened them out on his knee. 'Now,' he said, 'number one ! That I think I have seen before.' He mumbled over the opening sentences, and turned the page. 'Hallo !' he exclaimed, holding the letter from him, and speaking in a tone of surprise—almost of consternation—'how is this ?'

'What ?' said the rector.

‘You have torn off the latter part of this letter? Why on earth did you do that?’

‘I never did,’ Lindo answered incredulously. Obeying Jack’s gesture he came, and, standing by his chair, looked over his shoulder. He saw then that part of the latter half of the sheet had been torn off. The signature and the last few words of the letter were gone. He looked and wondered. ‘I never did it,’ he said positively, ‘whoever did. You may be sure of that.’

‘You are certain?’

‘Absolutely certain,’ the rector answered with considerable warmth. ‘I remember arranging and indorsing the packet. I am quite sure that this letter was intact then, for I read each one through. That was a few evenings after I came here.’

‘Have you ever shown the letters to anyone?’ Jack asked suspiciously.

‘Never,’ said the rector; ‘they have not been removed from this cupboard, to my knowledge, since I put them there.’

‘Think!’ Jack rejoined, pressing his point steadily. ‘I want you to be quite sure. You see this letter is rendered utterly worthless by the mutilation. Indeed, to produce it would be to raise a natural suspicion that the last sentence of the letter not being in our favour, we had got rid of it. Of course, the chances are that the earl’s solicitors have copies, but for the present that is not our business.’

‘Well,’ said the rector somewhat absently—he had been rather thinking than listening—‘I do

remember now a circumstance which may account for this. A short time after I came a man broke into the house and ransacked this cupboard. Possibly he did it.'

'A burglar, do you mean? Was he caught?' the barrister asked, figuratively pricking up his ears.

'No—or, rather, I should say yes,' Lindo answered. And then he explained how his curate, taking the man red-handed, had let him go, in the hope that, as it was his first offence, he would take warning and live honestly.

'But who was the burglar?' Jack inquired. 'You know, I suppose? Is he in the town now?'

'Clode never told me his name,' Lindo answered. 'The man made a point of that, and I did not press for it. I remember that Clode was somewhat ashamed of his clemency.'

'He had need to be,' Jack snorted. 'It sounds an extraordinary story. All the same, Lindo, I am not sure it has any connection with this.' He held the letter up before him as though drawing inspiration from it. 'This letter, you see,' he went on presently, 'being the first in date, would be inside the packet. Why should a man who wanted perhaps a bit of paper for a spill or a pipe-light unfasten this packet and take the innermost letter? I do not believe it.'

'But no one else save myself,' Lindo urged, 'has had access to the letter. And there it is torn.'

'Yes, here it is torn,' Jack admitted, gazing thoughtfully at it; 'that is true.'

For a few moments the two sat silent, Jack fingering the letter, Lindo with his eyes fixed gloomily on the fire. Suddenly the latter broke out without warning or preface. 'What a fool I have been !' he exclaimed, his tone one of abrupt, overwhelming conviction. 'Good heavens, what a fool I have been !'

His friend looked at him in surprise, and saw that his face was crimson. 'Is it about the letter ?' he asked, leaning forward, his tone sharp with professional impatience. 'You do not mean to say, Lindo, that you really——'

'No, no !' the young clergyman replied, ruthlessly interrupting him. 'It has nothing to do with the letter.'

He said no more, and Jack waited for further light ; but none came, and the barrister reapplied his thoughts to the problem before him. He had only just hit upon a new idea, however, when he was again diverted by an interruption from Lindo. 'Jack,' said the latter impressively, 'I want you to give a message for me.'

'Not a cartel to Lord Dynmore, I hope ?' the barrister muttered.

'No,' the rector answered, getting up and poking the fire unnecessarily—what a quantity of embarrassment has been liberated before now by means of pokers !—'no, I want you to give a message to your cousin—Miss Bonamy, I mean.' The rector paused, the poker still in his hand, and stole a sharp glance at his companion ; but, reassured by the discovery that he was to all appearance buried

in the letter, he continued: 'Would you mind telling her that I am sorry I misjudged her a short time back—she will understand—and behaved, I fear, very ungratefully to her? She warned me that there was a rumour afloat that something was amiss with my title, and I am afraid I was very rude to her. I should like you to tell her, if you will, that I—that I am particularly ashamed of myself,' he added, with a gulp.

He did not find the words easy of utterance—far from it; but the effort they cost him was slight and trivial compared with that which poor Jack found himself called upon to make. For a moment, indeed, he was silent, his heart rebelling against the task assigned to him. To carry *his* message to *her*! Then his nobler self answered to the call, and he spoke. His words, 'Yes, I'll tell her,' came, it is true, a little late, in a voice a trifle thick, and were uttered with a coldness which Lindo would have remarked had he not been agitated himself. But they came—at a price. The Victoria Cross for moral courage can seldom be gained by a single act of valour. Many a one has failed to gain it who had strength enough for the first blow. 'Yes, I will tell her,' Jack repeated a few seconds later, folding up the letter and laying it on the table, but so contriving that his face was hidden from his friend. 'To-morrow will do, I suppose?' he added, the faintest tinge of irony in his tone. He may be pardoned if he thought the apology he was asked to carry came a little late.

'Oh, yes, to-morrow will do,' Lindo answered

with a start; he had fallen into a reverie, but now roused himself. 'I am afraid you are very tired, old fellow,' he continued, looking gratefully at his friend. 'A friend in need is a friend indeed, you know. I cannot tell you'—with a sigh—'how very good I think it was of you to come to me.'

'Nonsense!' Jack said briskly. 'It was all in the day's work. As it is, I have done nothing. And that reminds me,' he continued, facing his companion with a smile—'what of the trouble between my uncle and you? About the sheep, I mean. You have put it in some lawyer's hands, have you not?'

'Yes,' Lindo answered, reluctantly.

'Quite right too,' said the barrister. 'Who are they?'

'Turner & Grey, of Birmingham.'

'Well, I will write,' Jack answered, 'if you will let me, and tell them to let the matter stand for the present. I think that will be the best course. Bonamy won't object.'

'But he has issued a writ,' the rector explained. A writ seemed to him a formidable engine. As well dally before the mouth of a cannon.

Jack, who knew better, smiled. The law's delays were familiar to him. He was aware of many a pleasant little halting-place between writ and judgment. 'Never mind about that,' he answered with a confident laugh. 'Shall I settle it for you? I shall know better, perhaps, what to say to them.'

The rector assented gladly; adding, 'Here is

their address.' It was stuck in the corner of a picture hanging over the fireplace. He took it down as he spoke and gave it to Jack, who put it carelessly into his pocket, and, seizing his hat, said he must go at once—that it was close on twelve. The rector would have repeated his thanks; but Jack would not stop to hear them, and in a moment was gone.

Reginald Lindo returned to the study after letting him out, and, dropping into the nearest chair, looked round with a sigh. Yet, the sigh notwithstanding, he was less unhappy now than he had been at dinner or while looking over that number of 'Punch.' His friend's visit had both cheered and softened him. His thoughts no longer dwelt on the earl's injustice, the desertion of his friends, or the humiliations in store for him, but went back to the warning Kate Bonamy had given him. Thence it was not unnatural that they should revert to the beginning of his acquaintance with her. He pictured her at Oxford, he saw her scolding Daintry in the stiff drawing-room, he saw her coming to meet him in the Red Lane; and, the veil of local prejudice being torn from his eyes by the events of the day, he began to discern that Kate, with all the drawbacks of her surroundings, was the fairest and noblest girl he had met at Claversham, or, for aught he could remember, elsewhere. His eyes glistened. He felt sure that for all the earls in England she would not have deserted him.

He had reached this point, and Jack had been

gone five minutes or more, when he was startled by a loud rap at the house-door. He stood up, and wondering who it could be at that hour, took a candle and went into the hall. Setting the candlestick on a table, he opened the door, and there, to his astonishment, was Jack come back again!

‘Ah, good!’ said the barrister, slipping in and shutting the door behind him, as though his return were not in the least degree extraordinary. ‘I thought it was you. Look here; there is one thing I forgot to ask you, Lindo. Where did you get the address of those lawyers?’

He asked the question so earnestly, and his face, now that it could be seen by the strong light of the candle at his elbow, wore so curious an expression, that the rector was for a moment quite taken aback. ‘They are good people, are they not?’ he asked, wondering much.

‘Oh, yes, the firm is good enough,’ Jack answered impatiently. ‘But who gave you their address?’

‘Clode,’ the rector answered. ‘I went round to his lodgings, and he wrote it down for me.’

‘At his lodgings?’ the barrister exclaimed.

‘Certainly.’

‘You are quite sure it was at his lodgings?’

‘I am quite sure.’

‘Ah! then look here,’ Jack replied, laying his hand on Lindo’s sleeve, and looking up at him with an air of peculiar seriousness—‘Just tell me once more, so that I may have no doubt about it. Are you sure that from the time you docketed those

letters until now you have never removed them—from this house, I mean ? ’

‘ Never ! ’

‘ Never let them go out of the house ? ’

‘ Never ! ’ the rector answered firmly. ‘ I am as certain of it as a man can be certain of anything. ’

‘ Thanks ! ’ Jack cried. ‘ All right. Good-night. ’

And that was all. In a twinkling he had the door open and was gone, leaving the rector to go to bed in such a state of mystification as made him almost forget his fallen fortunes.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DAY AFTER

THE rector did not expect to see Jack again for a time, and his first thought on rising next morning was of his curate. He had looked to see him, as we know, before bedtime. Disappointed in this, he still felt certain that the curate would hasten as soon as possible to offer his sympathy and assistance; and after breakfast he repaired to his study for the express purpose of receiving him. To find one friend in need is good, but to find two is better. The young clergyman felt, as people in trouble of a certain kind do feel, that though he had told Jack all about it, it would be a relief to tell Stephen all about it also; the more as Jack, whom he had told, was his personal friend, while Clode was identified with the place, and his unabated confidence and esteem—of retaining which the rector made no doubt—would go some way towards soothing the latter's wounded pride.

It was well, however, that Lindo, sitting down at his writing-table, found there some scattered notes upon which he could employ his thoughts, and which without any great concentration of

mind he could form into a sermon. For otherwise his time would have been wasted. Ten o'clock came, and eleven, and half-past eleven; but no curate.

Mr. Clode, in fact, was engaged elsewhere. About half-past ten he turned briskly into the drive leading to Mrs. Hammond's house and walked up it at a good pace, with the step of a man who has news to tell, and is going to tell it. The morning was bright and sunny, the air crisp and fresh, yet not too cold. The gravel crunched pleasantly under his feet, while the hoar-frost melting on the dark green leaves of the laurels bordered his path with a million gems as brilliant as evanescent. Possibly the pleasure he took in these things, possibly some thought of his own, lent animation to the curate's face and figure as he strode along. At any rate, Miss Hammond, meeting him suddenly at a turn in the approach, saw a change in him, and, reading the signs aright, blushed.

'Well?' she said, smiling a question as she held out her hand. They had scarcely been alone together since the afternoon when the rector's inopportune call had brought about an understanding between them.

'Well?' he answered, retaining her hand. 'What is it, Laura?'

'I thought you were going to tell me,' she said, glancing up with shy assurance. The morning air was not fresher. She was so bright and piquant in her furs and with her dazzling complexion, that

other eyes than her lover's might have been pardoned for likening her to the frost-drops on the laurels. At any rate, she sparkled as they did.

He looked down at her, fond admiration in his eyes. Had he not come up on purpose to see her? 'I think it is all right,' he said, in a slightly lower tone. 'I think I may answer for it, Laura, that we shall not have much longer to wait.'

She gazed at him, seeming for the moment startled and taken by surprise. 'Have you heard of a living, then?' she murmured, her eyes wide, her breath coming and going.

He nodded.

'Where?' she asked, in the same low tone. 'You do not mean—here?'

He nodded again.

'At Claversham!' she exclaimed. 'Then will Mr. Lindo have to go, do you think?'

'I think he will,' Clode answered, a glow of triumph warming his dark face and kindling his eyes. 'When Lord Dynmore left here yesterday he drove straight to Mr. Bonamy's. You hardly believe it, do you? Well, it is true, for I had it from a sure source. And, that being so, I do not think Lindo will have much chance against such an alliance. It is not as if he had many friends here, or had got on well with the people.'

'The poor people like him,' she urged.

'Yes,' Clode answered sharply. 'He has spent money amongst them. It was not his own, you see.'

It was a brutal thing to say, and she cast a glance of gentle reproof at him. She did not remonstrate, however, but, slightly changing the subject, asked, 'Still, if Mr. Lindo goes, you are not sure of the living?'

'I think so,' he answered, smiling confidently down at her.

She looked puzzled. 'How do you know?' she asked. 'Did Lord Dynmore promise it to you?'

'No; I wish he had,' he answered quickly. 'All the same, I think I am fairly sure of it without the promise.' And then he related to her what the archdeacon had told him as to Lord Dynmore's intention of presenting the curates in future. 'Now do you see, Laura?' he said.

'Yes, I see,' she answered, looking down, and absently poking a hole in the gravel with the point of her umbrella.

'And you are content?'

'Yes,' she answered, looking up brightly from a little dream of the rectory as it should be, when feminine taste had transformed it with the aid of Persian rugs and old china and the hundred knick-knacks which are half a woman's life—'Yes, I am content, Mr. Clode.'

'Say "Stephen."'

'I am content, Stephen,' she answered obediently, a bright blush for a moment mingling with her smile.

He was about to make some warm rejoinder, when the sound of footsteps approaching from the house diverted his attention, and he looked up. The new-comer was Mrs. Hammond on her way

into the town. She waved her hand to him. 'Good-morning,' she cried in her cheery voice—'you are just the person I wanted to see, Mr. Clode. This is good luck. Now, how is he?'

'Who? Mrs. Hammond,' said the curate, taken off his guard.

'Who?' she replied, reproach in her tone. She was a kind-hearted woman, and the scene in her drawing-room had really cost her a few minutes' sleep. 'Why, Mr. Lindo, to be sure. Whom else should I mean? I suppose you went in last night at once and told him how much we all sympathised with him? Indeed, I hope you did not leave him until you saw him well to bed, for I am sure he was hardly fit to be left alone, poor fellow!'

Mr. Clode stood silent, and looked troubled. Really, if it had occurred to him, he would have called to see Lindo. But it had not occurred to him, after what had happened—perhaps because he had been busied about things which 'seemed worth while.' He regretted now that he had not done so, since Mrs. Hammond seemed to think it so much a matter of course; the more as the omission compelled him to choose his side earlier than he need have done. However, it was too late now. So he shook his head. 'I have not seen him, Mrs. Hammond,' he said gravely. 'I have not been to the rectory.'

'What! you have not seen him?' she cried in amazement.

'No, Mrs. Hammond, I have not,' he answered, a slight tinge of hauteur in his manner. After all,

he reflected, he would have found it painful to play another part before Laura after disclosing so much of his mind to her. 'What is more, Mrs. Hammond,' he continued, 'I am not anxious to see him; for, to tell you the truth, I fear that the meeting could only be a painful one.'

'Why, you do not mean to say,' the lady answered in a low, awe-stricken voice, 'that you think he knew anything about it, Mr. Clode?'

'At any rate,' the curate replied firmly, 'I cannot acquit him.'

'Not acquit him! Not acquit Mr. Lindo!' she stammered.

'No, I cannot,' Clode replied, striving to express in his voice and manner his extreme conscientiousness and the gloomy sense of responsibility under which he had arrived at his decision. 'I cannot get out of my head,' he continued gravely, 'Lord Dymore's remark that, if the circumstances aroused suspicion in my mind, they could scarcely fail to apprise Mr. Lindo, who was more nearly concerned, of the truth, or something like the truth. Mind!' the curate added with a great show of candour, 'I do not say, Mrs. Hammond, that Mr. Lindo knew. I only say I think he suspected.'

'Well, *that* is very good of you!' Mrs. Hammond exclaimed, with a spirit and a power of sarcasm he had not expected. 'I daresay Mr. Lindo will be much obliged to you for *that*! But, for my part, I think it is a distinction without a difference!' And she nodded her head two or three times in great excitement.

‘Oh, no!’ the curate protested hastily.

‘Well, I think it is, at any rate!’ retorted the lady, very red in the face, and with all the bugles in her bonnet shaking. ‘However, everyone to his opinion. But that is not mine, and I am sorry it is yours. Why, you are his curate!’ she added in a tone of indignant wonder, which brought the blood to Clode’s cheeks, and made him bite his lip in impotent anger. ‘You ought to be the last person to doubt him!’

‘Can I help it if I do?’ he answered sullenly.

An angry reply was on Mrs. Hammond’s lips, but her daughter intercepted it. ‘Mother,’ she said hurriedly, ‘if Mr. Clode thinks in that way, can he be blamed for telling us? We are not the town. What he has told us he has told us in confidence.’

‘A confidence Mrs. Hammond has made me bitterly regret,’ he rejoined, taking skilful advantage of the intervention.

Mrs. Hammond grunted. She was still angry, but she felt herself baffled. ‘Well, I do not understand these things, perhaps,’ she said. ‘But I do not agree with Mr. Clode, and I am not going to pretend to.’

‘I am sure he does not wish you to,’ said Laura, sweetly. ‘Only you did not quite understand, I think, that he was only giving us his private opinion. Of course, he would not tell it to the town.’

‘Well, that makes a difference, of course,’ Mrs. Hammond allowed. ‘But now I will say good-

morning! For myself, I shall go straight to the rectory and inquire. Are you coming, Laura?’

Laura hesitated a moment, but she thought it prudent to go, and, with a bright little nod, she tripped after her mother. Mr. Clode, thus deserted, walked slowly down the drive, and wondered whether he had been premature in his revolt. He did not think so; and yet he wished he had not been so hasty—that he had not shown his hand quite so early. He had been a little carried away by the events of the previous afternoon. Even now, however, the more he thought of it, the more hopeless seemed the rector’s position. Openly denounced by his patron as an impostor, at war with his churchwarden, disliked by a powerful section of the parish, one action already commenced against him and another threatened—what else could he do but resign? ‘He may say he will not, to-day and to-morrow,’ the curate thought, smiling darkly to himself; ‘but they will be too much for him the day after.’

And whether Mr. Clode told this opinion of his in the town or not, it was certainly a very common one. Never had Claversham been treated to such a dish of gossip as this. On the evening of the bazaar, before the unsold goods had been cleared from the tables, the wildest rumours were already afloat in the town. The rector had been arrested; he had decamped; he was to be tried for fraud; he was not in holy orders at all; Mrs. Bedford would have to be married over again! With the morning these reports died away, and something

like the truth came to be known—to the inexpressible satisfaction of Dr. Gregg and his like. The doctor was in and out of half the houses in the town that day. ‘Resign!’ he would say with a shriek—‘of course he will resign! And glad to escape so easily!’ Dr. Gregg, indeed, was in his glory now. The parts were reversed. It was for him now to meet the rector with a patronising nod; only, for some reason best known to himself, and perhaps arising from a subtle difference between the two men, he preferred to celebrate his triumph figuratively, and behind Lindo’s back.

What was said, and how it was said, can easily be imagined. When a man, who for some cause has held his head a little above his neighbours, stumbles and falls, we know what is likely to be said of him. And the young rector knew, and in his heart and in his study suffered horribly. All the afternoon of the day after the bazaar he walked the town with a smile on his face, ostensibly visiting in his district, really vindicating his pride and courage. He carried his head as high as ever, and the skirts of his long black coat fluttered as bravely as before. Dr. Gregg, who saw him from the Reading-Room window, gave it as his opinion that he did not know what shame meant. But at heart the young man was very miserable. He knew that inquisitive eyes were upon his every gesture; that he was watched, jeered at, worst of all—pitied. He guessed, as the day wore on, drawing the inference from the curate’s avoidance of him, that even Clode had deserted him. And this perhaps,

almost as much as the resentment he harboured against Lord Dynmore, hardened him in his resolve not to resign or abate one tittle of his rights.

He fancied he stood alone. But, of course, there were some who sympathised with him, and some who held their tongues and declined to commit themselves to any opinion. Among the latter Mr. Bonamy was conspicuous, much to the disgust of Dr. Gregg, whose first expression on hearing the news had been, 'What nuts for Bonamy!' As a fact, the snappish little doctor had never found his friend so morose and unpleasant as when he tried to sound him on this subject. He first espied him on the other side of the street, and rushed across, stuttering, almost before he reached him, 'Well? He will have to resign, won't he?'

'Who?' Mr. Bonamy said, standing still, and fixing his cold grey eyes on the excited little man. 'Who will have to resign?'

'Why, the rector, to be sure!' rejoined Gregg, feeling the check unpleasantly.

'Will he?'

'Well, I should say so,' urged the doctor, now quite taken aback, and gazing at the other with eyes of surprise. 'But I suppose you know best, Bonamy.'

'Then I am going to keep my knowledge to myself!' snarled the lawyer. And, rattling a handful of silver in his pocket, he stalked away, his hat on the back of his head, and his lank figure more ungainly than usual. In truth, he was in a very bad temper. He was angry with Lord Dynmore and dissatisfied with himself; given, indeed,

to calling himself, half a dozen times in an hour, a quixotic fool for having thrown away the earl's business for the sake of a scruple which was little more than a whim. It is all very well to have a queer rugged code of honour of one's own, and to observe it. But when the observance sends away business—such business as brings with it the social consideration which men prize most highly when they most affect to despise it—why then a man is apt to take out his self-denial in ill-temper. Mr. Bonamy did so.

So Dr. Gregg went away calling the lawyer a bear, and an ill-bred fellow who did not know his own friends. Alas! the same thing might have been said, and with greater justice, of the rector. The archdeacon sat an hour in the rectory study, waiting patiently for him to return from his district, and after all got but a sorry reception. The elder man expressed, and expressed very warmly—he had come to do so—his full belief in Lindo's honesty and good-faith, and was greatly touched by the effect his words produced upon the young fellow; who had come into the room, on learning his visitor's presence, with set lips and eyes of challenge, but had by-and-by to turn his back and look out of the window, while in a very low tone he murmured his thanks. But, alas! the archdeacon went further than sympathy. He let drop something about concession, and then the boat was over!

'Concession!' said the young man, turning as on a pivot, with every hair of his head bristling,

and his voice clear enough now. 'What kind of concession do you mean?'

'Well,' said the archdeacon persuasively, 'the earl is a choleric man—a most passionate man, I know; and, when excited, utterly foolish and wrong-headed. But in his cooler moments I do not know anyone more just or, indeed, more generous. I feel sure that if you could prevail on yourself to meet him half-way——'

'To meet him half-way? By resigning, do you mean?' snapped the rector, interrupting him point-blank with the question.

'Oh no, no,' said the archdeacon, 'I do not mean that.'

'Then in what way? How?'

But as the archdeacon really meant by resigning, he could not answer the question. And the interview ended in Lindo roundly stating his views as he walked up and down the room. 'I will not resign!' he declared. 'Understand that, archdeacon! I will not resign! If Lord Dynmore can put me out, well and good—let him. If not, I stay. He may be just or generous,' the young man continued scornfully—'all I know is, that he insulted me grossly, and as no gentleman would have insulted another.'

'He is passionate, and was taken by surprise,' the archdeacon ventured to say. But the words were wasted, Lindo would not listen; and his visitor had presently to go, fearing that he had done more harm than good by his mediation. As for the rector, he was severely scolded later in the

evening by Jack Smith for having omitted to lay the letters offering him the living before the arch-deacon, or to explain to him the precise circumstances under which he had accepted it.

‘But he said he did not doubt me,’ the rector urged rather fractiously.

‘Pooh! that is not the point,’ the barrister retorted. ‘Of course he does not. He knows you. But I want you to put him in possession of such a case as he may lay before others who do not know you. Look here, you are acquainted with a man called Felton, are you not?’

‘Yes,’ Lindo answered, with a slight start.

‘Well, perhaps you are not aware that he has been to Lord Dynmore—so the tale runs in the town, and I know it is true—and stated that you have been for weeks bribing him to keep the secret.’

The rector sat motionless, staring at his friend. ‘I did not know it,’ he said at last, quite quietly. He was becoming accustomed to surprises of this kind. ‘It is a wicked lie, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Jack assented, tossing one leg easily over the other, and thrusting his hands deep into his trousers’ pockets. ‘But what do you say to it?’

‘The man came to me,’ Lindo explained, ‘and told me that he was Lord Dynmore’s servant, and that, crossing from America, he had foolishly lost his money at play. He begged me to assist him until Lord Dynmore’s return, and I did so. Some ten days ago I discovered that he was leading a disreputable life, and I stopped the allowance.’

‘Thanks,’ Jack answered, nodding his head. ‘That is precisely what I thought. But the mischief of it is, you see, that the man’s tale may be true in his eyes. He may believe that he was blackmailing you. And therefore, since we cannot absolutely refute his story, it is the more important that we should show as good a case as possible *aliunde*. Nor does it make any difference,’ Jack continued drily, ‘that the man, after seeing Lord Dynmore last night, has taken himself off this morning.’

‘What! Felton?’ the rector exclaimed, coming suddenly upright.

‘Yes. There is no doubt he has absconded. Bonamy’s clerk has been after him all day, and has discovered that he begged half a crown from your curate, to whom he was seen speaking at the Top of the Town about ten this morning. Since that time he has not been seen.’

‘He may turn up yet,’ said the rector.

‘I do not think he will,’ the barrister replied, with a shrewd gleam in his eyes. ‘But you must not flatter yourself that his disappearance will do you any good. Of course, some people will say that he was afraid to remain and support a false statement. But more, I fear, will lean to the opinion that he was got out of the way by someone—you, for instance.’

‘I see,’ said Lindo slowly, after a long pause. ‘Then it is the more imperative that I should not dream of resigning.’

‘Certainly,’ said Jack. ‘It would be madness.’

CHAPTER XX

A SUDDEN CALL

DAINTRY was sitting in the dining-room a few mornings after the bazaar. She looked up from her Ollendorf as her sister entered the room about some housekeeping matter; and, more for the sake of wasting a moment than for any other reason, attacked her. 'Kate,' she said with a yawn, 'are you never going to see old Peggy Jones again? I am sure that you have not been near her for a fortnight.'

'I ought to go, I know,' Kate answered, pausing by the sideboard, with a big bunch of keys dangling from her fingers and an absent expression in her grey eyes. 'I have not been for some time.'

'I should think you had not!' Daintry retorted with severity. 'You have hardly been out of the house the last four days.'

A faint colour stole into the elder girl's face, and, seeming suddenly to recollect what she wanted, she turned and began to search in the drawer behind her. She knew quite well that what Daintry said was true—that she had not been out

for four days. Jack had delivered the rector's message to her, and she had listened with downcast eyes and grave composure—a composure so perfect that even the messenger, who held the clue in his hand, was almost deceived by it. All the same, it had made her very happy. The young rector appreciated at last the motive which had led her to give him that strange warning. He was grateful to her, and anxious to make her understand his gratitude. And while she dwelt on this with pleasure, she foresaw with a strange mingling of joy and fear, of anticipation and shrinking, that the first time she met him abroad he would strive to make it still more clear to her.

So for four days, lest she should seem even to herself to be precipitating the meeting, she had refrained from going out. Now, when Daintry remarked upon the change in her habits, she blushed at the thought that she might all the time have been exaggerating a trifle; and, though she did not go out at once, in the course of the afternoon she did issue forth, and called upon old Peggy. Coming back she had to pass through the churchyard, and there, on the very spot where she had once forced herself to address him, she met the rector.

She saw him while he was still some way off, and before he saw her, and she looked eagerly for any trace of the trouble of the last few days. It had not changed him, outwardly at any rate. It had rather accentuated him, she thought. He looked more boyish, more impetuous, more inde-

pendent than ever, as he came swinging along, his blonde head thrown back, his eyes roving this way and that, his long skirts flapping behind him. Of defeat or humiliation he betrayed not a trace; and the girl wondered, seeing him so calm and strong, if he had really sent her that message—which seemed to have come from a man hard pressed.

A glance told her all this; and then he saw her, and, a flash of recognition sweeping across his face, quickened his steps to meet her. He seemed to be shaking hands with her before he had well considered what he would say, for when he had gone through that ceremony, and wished her ‘Good morning,’ he stood awkwardly silent. Then he murmured hurriedly, ‘I have been waiting for some time to speak to you, Miss Bonamy.’

‘Indeed?’ she said calmly. She wondered at her own self-control.

‘Yes,’ he answered, his colour rising. ‘And I could not have met you in a better place.’

‘Why?’ she asked. As if she did not know! The simplest woman is an actress by nature.

‘Because,’ he answered, ‘it is well that I should do penance where I sinned. Miss Bonamy,’ he continued impetuously, yet in a low voice, and with his eyes on the ground, ‘I owe you a deep apology for my rude thanklessness when I met you here last. You were right, and I was wrong; but if it had been the other way, still I ought not to have behaved to you as I did. I thought—that is—I——’

He faltered and stopped. He meant that he had thought that she was playing into her father's hands, but he could hardly tell her that. She understood, however, or guessed, and for the first time she blushed. 'Pray do not say any more about it,' she said hurriedly.

'I did send you a message,' he answered.

'Oh, yes, yes,' she replied, anxious only to put an end to his apologies. 'Please think no more about it.'

'Well,' he rejoined with a smile which did not completely veil his earnestness, 'I do find it a little more pleasant to look farther back—to our Oxford visit. But you are going this way. May I turn with you?'

'I am only going home,' Kate answered coldly. He had been humble enough to her. He had said and looked all she had expected. But he was not at all the crushed, beaten man whom she had looked to meet. He was, outwardly at least, the same man who had once sought her society for a few weeks, and had then slighted her and shunned her, that he might consort with the Homfrays and their class. He had not said he was sorry for *that*.

He read her tone aright, and coloured furiously, growing a thousand times more confused than before. It was on the cards that he would accept the rebuff, and leave her. Indeed, that was his first impulse. But the consciousness, which the next moment filled his mind, that he had deserved this, and perhaps the charm of her grey eyes, over-

came him. 'I will come a little way with you, if you will let me,' he said, turning and walking by her side.

Kate's heart gave a great leap. She understood both the first thought and the second, the weaker impulse and the stronger one which mastered it, and she would not have been a woman had she not felt her triumph. She hastened to find something to say, and could think only of the bazaar. She asked him if it had been a success.

'The bazaar?' he answered. 'To tell you the truth, I am afraid I hardly know. I should say so, now you ask me, but I have not given much thought to it since. I have been too fully occupied with other things,' he added, a note of bitterness in his voice. 'Ah! Miss Bonamy,' with a fresh change of tone, 'what a good fellow your cousin is!'

'Yes, he is indeed!' she answered heartily.

'I cannot tell you,' he continued, 'what generous help and support he has given me during the last few days. He has been of the greatest possible comfort to me.'

She looked up at him impulsively. 'He is Daintry's hero,' she said.

'Yes,' he answered, laughing, 'I remember that her praise made me almost jealous of him. That was when I first knew you—when I was coming to Claversham, you remember, Miss Bonamy, full of pleasant anticipations. The reality has been different. Jack has told you, of course, of Lord

Dynmore's strange attack upon me? But perhaps,' he added, checking himself, and glancing at her, 'I ought not to speak to you about it, as your father is acting for him.'

'I do not think he is,' she murmured, looking straight before her.

'But—it is true the only communication I have had has been from London—still I thought—I mean I was under the impression that Lord Dynmore had at once gone to your father.'

'I think he saw him at the office,' Kate answered, 'but I believe my father is not acting for him.'

'Do you know why?' asked the rector bluntly. 'Why he is not, I mean?'

'No,' she said—that and nothing more. She was too proud to defend her father, though he had let drop enough in the family circle to enable her to form her own conclusions, and she might have made out a story which would have set the lawyer in a light differing much from that in which the rector was accustomed to view him.

Reginald Lindo walked on, considering the matter. Suddenly he said, 'The archdeacon thinks I ought to resign. What do you think, Miss Bonamy?'

Her heart began to beat quickly, and with good cause. He was seeking her advice! He was asking her opinion in this matter so utterly important to him, so absolutely vital! For a moment she could not speak, she was so filled with surprise.

Then she said gently, her eyes on the pavement, 'I do not think I can judge.'

'But you must have heard—more I dare say than I have!' he rejoined with a forced laugh. 'Will you tell me what you think?'

She looked before her, her face troubled. Then she spoke bravely.

'I think you should judge for yourself,' she said in a low tone, full of serious feeling. 'The responsibility is yours, Mr. Lindo. I do not think that you should depend entirely on anyone's advice. I mean, you should try to do right according to your conscience—not acting hastily, but coolly, and on reflection.'

They were almost at Mr. Bonamy's door when she said this, and he traversed the remainder of the distance without speaking. At the steps he halted and held out his hand. 'Thank you,' he said simply, his eyes seeking hers for a moment and dwelling on them, a steady light in their gaze. 'I hope I shall use this advice to better purpose than the last you gave me. Good-bye.'

She bowed silently, and went in, her heart full of strange rapture, and he turned back and walked up the street. The dusk was falling. A few yards in front of him the lame lamplighter was going his rounds, ladder on shoulder. In many of the shops the gas was beginning to gleam. The night was coming, was almost come, yet still above the houses the sky, a pale greenish blue, was bright with daylight, against which the great tower of the church stood up bulky and black. The young man was in

a curious mood. Though he walked the common pavement, he felt himself, as he gazed upwards, alone with his thoughts, which went back, whether he would or no, to his first evening in Claversham. He remembered how free from reproach or stumbling-blocks his path had seemed then, to what blameless ends he had in fancy devoted himself. What works of thanksgiving, small but beneficent as the tiny rills which steal downwards through the ferns to the pasture, he had planned. And in the centre of that past dream of the future he pictured now—Kate Bonamy. Well, the reality was different.

He was just beginning to wonder when he would be likely to meet her again, and to dwell with idle pleasure on some of the details of her dress and appearance, when the sudden clatter of hoofs behind him caused him to turn his head. Far down the steep street a rider had turned the corner, and was galloping up the middle of the roadway, the manner in which he urged on his pony seeming to proclaim disaster and ill news. Opposite the rector he pulled up and cried out, ‘Where is the doctor’s, sir?’

Lindo turned sharply round and rang the bell of the house behind him, which happened to be Gregg’s. ‘Here,’ he said briefly. ‘What is it, my man?’

‘An explosion in the Big Pit at Baerton,’ the man replied. He was almost blubbing with excitement and the speed with which he had come. ‘There is like to be fifty killed and as many hurt

I was told,' he continued ; ' but I came straight off.'

' Good heavens ! when did it happen ? ' Lindo asked, a wave of wild excitement following his first impulse of horror.

' About an hour and a quarter ago, as near as I can say,' the messenger answered. He was merely a farm-labourer called from the plough.

Dr. Gregg was out, and the clergyman walked by the side of the horseman, a crowd gathering behind him as the news spread, to the house of Mr. Keogh, the other doctor, who fortunately lived close by. He was at home, and, the messenger going in to tell him the particulars, in five minutes he had his gig at the door. The rector, who had gone in too, came out with him, and, without asking leave, climbed to the seat beside him.

' What is this ? ' said the surgeon, turning to him sharply. He was an elderly man, stout and white-haired. ' Are you coming, too, Mr. Lindo ? '

' I think so,' the rector answered. ' There may be cases in which you can do little and I much. Mr. Walker, the vicar of Baerton, is ill in bed, I know ; and as the news has come to me first, I think I ought to go.'

' Right you are ! ' said Mr. Keogh gruffly, yet with a shrug of the shoulders. ' Let go ! '

In another moment the fast-trotting cob was whirling the two men down the street. They turned the corner sharply, and as the breeze met them on the bridge, compelling Lindo to turn up the collar of his coat and draw the rug more closely

round him, the church clock in the town behind them struck the half-hour. 'Half-past five,' said the rector. The surgeon did not answer. They were in the open country now, the hedges speeding swiftly by them in the light of the lamps, and the long outline of Baer Hill, a huge misshapen hump which rose into a point at one end, lying dim and black before them. A night drive is always impressive. In the gloom, in the sough of the wind, in the sky serenely star-lit, or a tumult of hurrying clouds, in the rattle of the wheels, in the monotonous fall of the hoofs, there is an appeal to the sombre side of man. How much more is this the case when the sough of the wind seems to the imagination a cry of pain, and the night is a dark background on which the fancy paints dying faces! At such a time the cares of life, which day by day rise one beyond another and prevent us dwelling overmuch on the end, sink into pettiness, leaving us face to face with weightier issues.

'There have been accidents here before?' the clergyman asked, after a long silence.

'Thirty-five years ago there was one!' his companion answered, with a groan which betrayed his apprehensions. 'Good heavens, sir, I remember it now! I was young then, and fresh from the hospitals; but it was almost too much for me!'

'I hope that this one has been exaggerated,' Lindo replied, entering fully into the other's feelings. 'I did not quite understand the man's account; but, as far as I could follow it, one of the two shafts—the downcast shaft I think he said—

was choked by the explosion, and rendered quite useless.'

'Just what I expected!' ejaculated his companion.

'So that they could only reach the workings through the upcast shaft, in which they had rigged up some temporary lifting gear.'

'Ay, and it is the deepest pit here,' the surgeon chimed in, as the horse began to breast the steeper part of the ascent, and the furnace fires, before and above them, began to flicker and glow, now sinking into darkness, now flaming up like beacon-lights. 'The workings are two thousand feet below the surface, man!'

'Stop!' Lindo said. 'Here is someone looking for us, I think.'

Two women with shawls over their heads came to the side of the gig. 'Be you the doctors?' one of them said, peering in. Keogh answered that they were, and then in another minute the two were following her up the side of the cutting which here confined the road. The hillside gained, they were hurried through the darkness round pit-banks and slag-heaps, and under cranes and ruinous, sinking walls, and over and under mysterious obstacles, sometimes looming large in the gloom and sometimes lying unseen at their feet—until they emerged at length with startling abruptness into a large circle of dazzling light. Four great fires were burning close together, and round them, motionless and for the most part silent, in appear-

ance almost apathetic, stood hundreds of dark shadows—men and women waiting for news.

The silence and inaction of so large a crowd struck a chill to Lindo's heart. A tremor ran through him as he advanced with his companion towards a knot of a dozen rough fellows who stood together, some half-stripped, some muffled up in pilot-jackets or coarse, shiny clothes. The crowd seemed to be watching them, and they spoke now and then to one another in a desultory, expectant fashion, from which he judged they were persons in authority.

'It is a bad job—a very bad job!' his companion the doctor was saying nervously, when his attention, which had strayed for a moment, returned to its duty. 'Is there anything I can do yet?'

'Well, that depends, doctor,' answered one of the men, whose manner of speaking proved that he was not a mere working collier. 'There is no one up yet,' he explained, eyeing the doctor dubiously. 'But it does not exactly follow that you can do nothing. Some of us have just come up, and there is a shift of men exploring down there now. Three bodies have been recovered, and they are at the foot of the shaft; and three poor fellows have been found alive, of whom one has since died. The other two are within fifty yards of the shaft, and as comfortable as we can make them. But they are bad—too bad to come up in a bucket; and we can rig up nothing bigger at present, so there they

are fixed. The question is, will you go down to them ? ’

Mr. Keogh’s face fell. He shook his head. He was no longer young, and to descend a sheer depth of six hundred yards in a bucket dangling at the end of a makeshift rope was not in his line. ‘No, thank you,’ he said, ‘I could not do it, indeed.’

‘Come, doctor,’ the man persisted—he was the manager of the neighbouring colliery, as Lindo learned afterwards, ‘you will be there in no time.’

‘Just so,’ said the surgeon drily. ‘I have no doubt I should go down fast enough. It is the coming back is the rub, you see, Mr. Peat. No, thank you, I could not.’

But the other still urged him. ‘These poor fellows are about as bad as they can be, and you know if the mountain will not go to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain.’

‘I know; and if it were a mountain, well and good,’ Mr. Keogh answered, smiling in sickly fashion as his eye strayed to a black well-like hole close at hand—a mere hole in some loose planks, surmounted by a windlass and fringed with ugly wreckage. ‘But it is not. It is quite the other thing, you see.’

Mr. Peat shrugged his shoulders, and glanced at his companions rather in sorrow than surprise. Lindo, standing behind the doctor, saw the look. Till then he had stood silent. Now he pressed forward. ‘Did I hear you say that one of the injured men died after he was found ? ’ he asked,

‘Yes, that is so,’ the manager answered, looking keenly at him, and wondering who he was.

‘The others who are hurt—are their lives in danger?’

‘I am afraid so,’ the man replied reluctantly.

‘Then I have a right to be with them,’ the rector answered quickly. ‘I am a clergyman, and I have hastened here, fearing this might be the case. But I have also attended an ambulance class, and I can dress a burn. Besides, I am a younger man than our friend here, and, if you will let me down, I will go.’

‘By George, sir!’ the manager exclaimed, looking round for approval and smiting his thigh heavily, ‘you are a man as well as a parson, and down you shall go, and thank you! You may make the men more comfortable, and any way you will put heart into them, for you have some to spare yourself. As for danger, there is none!—Jack!’—this in a louder voice to someone in the background—‘just twitch that rope! And get that tub up, will you? Look slippery now.’

Lindo felt a hand on his arm and, obeying the silent gesture of the nearest gaunt figure, stepped aside. In a twinkling the man stripped off the parson’s long coat and put on him the pilot-jacket from his own shoulders; a second man gave him a peaked cap of stiff leather in place of his soft hat; and a third fastened a pit-lamp round his neck, explaining to him how to raise the wick without unlocking the lamp, and showing him that, if it swung too much on one side or were upset, its

flame would expire of itself. And upon one thing Lindo was never tired of dwelling afterwards—the kindly tact of these rough men, and how by seemingly casual words, and even touches, the roughest sought to encourage him, while ignoring the possibility of his feeling alarm.

Meanwhile Mr. Keogh, standing in a state of considerable perplexity and discomfiture where the rector had left him, heard a well-known voice at his elbow, and turned to find that Gregg had arrived. The younger doctor was not the man to be awed into silence, and, as he came up, was speaking loudly. ‘Hallo, Mr. Keogh!’ he said. ‘I heard you were before me. Have you got them all in hand? Cuts or burns mostly, eh?’

‘They are not above-ground yet,’ Mr. Keogh answered. He and Gregg were not on speaking terms, but such an emergency as this was allowed to override their estrangement.

‘Oh, then we shall have to wait,’ Gregg answered, looking round on the scene with a mixture of curiosity and professional *aplomb*. ‘I wish I had spared my horse. Any other medical man here?’

‘No; and they want one of us to go down in the bucket,’ Keogh explained. ‘There are some injured men at the foot of the shaft. I have a wife and children, and I thought that perhaps you——’

‘Would not mind breaking my neck!’ Gregg retorted with decision. ‘No, thank you, not for me! I hope to have a wife and children some

day, and I will keep my neck for them. Go down!’ he repeated, looking round with extreme scorn. ‘Pooh! No one can expect us to do it! It is these people’s business, and they are used to it; but there is not a sane man in the kingdom, besides, would go down that place after what has just happened. It is a quarter of a mile as a stone falls, if it is an inch!’

‘It is all that,’ the other assented, feeling much relieved.

‘And a height makes me giddy,’ Dr. Gregg added.

‘I feel the same of late,’ said his elder.

‘No, every man to his trade,’ Gregg concluded, settling the matter to his satisfaction. ‘Let them bring them up, and we will doctor them. But while they are below ground—Hallo! Who is this?’

The next moment he uttered an oath of surprise and anger. As his eye wandered round, it had lit on Lindo coming forward to the shaft; and the doctor recognised him in spite of his disguise. One look, and Gregg would cheerfully have given ten pounds either to have had the rector away, or to have arrived a little later himself. He had calculated in his own mind that, if no outsider went down, he could scarcely be blamed for taking care of himself. But, if the rector went down, the matter would wear a different aspect. And Dr. Gregg saw this so clearly that he turned pale with rage and chagrin, and swore again under his breath.

CHAPTER XXI

IN PROFUNDIS

THE young clergyman's face, as he walked forward to the shaft, formed, if the truth be told, no index to his mind. For while it remained calm and even wore a faint smile, he was inwardly conscious of a strong desire to take hold of anything which presented itself, even a straw. Nevertheless, he stepped gravely into the tub, amid a low murmur; and, clutching the iron bar above it, felt himself at a word of command lifted gently into the air, and swung over the shaft. For an uncomfortable five seconds or so he remained stationary; then there was a jerk—another—and the dark figures, the line of faces, and the glare of the fires leapt suddenly above his head. He found himself in darkness dropping through space with a swift sickening motion, as of one falling away from himself. His heart rose into his throat. There was a loud buzzing in his ears, and still above this he heard the dull rattling sound of the rope being paid out. Every other sense was spent in the stern grip of his hands on the bar above his head.

The horrible sensation of falling lasted for a

few seconds only. It passed away. He was no longer in space with nothing stable about him, but in a small tub at the end of a tough rope. Except for a slight swaying motion, he hardly knew that he was still descending; and presently a faint light, more diffused than his own lamp, grew visible. Then he came gently to a standstill, and someone held up a lantern to his face. With difficulty he made out two huge figures standing beside him, who laid hold of the tub and pulled it towards them until it rested on something solid. 'You are welcome,' one growled, as, aided by a hand of each, Lindo stepped out. 'You will be the doctor, I suppose, master? Well, this way. Catch hold of my jacket.'

Lindo obeyed, being only too glad of the help thus given him; for though the men seemed to move about with ease and certainty, he could make out nothing but shapeless gloom. 'Now you sit right down there,' continued the collier, when they had walked a few yards, 'and you will get the sight of your eyes in a bit.'

He did as he was bid; and one by one the objects about him became visible. His first feeling was one of astonishment. He had put a quarter of a mile of solid earth between himself and the sunlight, and still, for all he could see, he might be merely in a cellar under a street. He found himself seated on a rough bench, in a low-roofed, windowless, wooden cabin, strangely resembling a very dirty London office in a fog. True, everything was black—very black. On another bench, oppo-

site him, sat the two colliers who had received him, their lamps between their knees. His first impulse was to tell them hurriedly that he was not the doctor. 'I am afraid you are disappointed,' he added, 'but I hope one will follow me down. I am a clergyman, and I want to do something for these poor fellows, if you will take me to them.'

The two men betrayed no surprise, but he who had spoken before quietly poked up the wick of his lamp and held the lantern up so as to get a good view of his face. 'Ay, ay,' he said, nodding, as he lowered it again. 'I thought you weren't unbeknown to me. You are the parson we fetched to poor Jim Lucas a while ago. Well, Jim will have a rare cageful of his friends with him to-night.'

The rector shuddered. Such apathy, such matter-of-factness was new to him. But though his heart sank as the collier rose and, swinging his lamp in his hand, passed through the doorway, he made haste to follow him; and the man's next words, 'You had best look to your steps, master, for there is a deal of rubbish come down'—pointing as they did to a material danger—brought him, in the diversion of his thoughts, something like relief.

The road on which he found himself, being the main heading or highway of the pit, was a good and wide one. It was even possible to stand upright in it. Here and there, however, it was partially blocked by falls of coal caused by the explosion, and over one of these his guide put out his hand to assist him. Lindo's lamp was by this time burning low.

The pitman silently took it and raised the wick, a grim smile distorting his face as he handed it back. 'You will be about the first of the gentry,' he muttered, 'as has been down this pit without paying his footing.'

Lindo took the words for a hint, and was shocked by the man's insensibility. 'My good fellow,' he answered, 'if that is all, you shall have what you like another time. But for heaven's sake let us think of these poor fellows now.'

The man turned on him suddenly and swore aloud. 'Do you think I meant that?' he cried, with another violent oath.

The rector recoiled, not at the sound of the man's profanity, but in disgust at his own mistake. Then he held out his hand. 'My man,' he said, 'I beg your pardon. It was I who was wrong. I did not understand you.'

The giant looked at him with another stare, but made no answer, and a dozen steps brought them to a second cabin. Across the doorway—there was no door—hung a rough curtain of matting. This the man raised, and, holding his lamp over the threshold, invited the rector to look in. 'I guess,' he added significantly, 'that you would not have made that mistake, master, after seeing this.'

Lindo peered in. On the floor, which was little more than six feet square, lay four quiet figures, motionless, and covered with coarse sacking. No eye falling on them could take them for anything but what they were. The visitor shuddered, as his guide let the curtain fall again, muttering, with a

backward jerk of the head, 'Two of them I came down with this morning—in the cage.'

The rector had nothing to answer, and the man, preceding him to a cabin a few yards farther on, invited him by a sign to enter, and himself turned back the way they had come. A faint moaning warned Lindo, before he raised the matting, what he must expect to see. Instinctively, as he stepped in, his eyes sought the floor; and although three pitmen crouching upon one of the benches rose and made way for him, he hardly noticed them, so occupied was he with pitiful looking at the two men lying on coarse beds on the floor. They were bandaged and muffled almost out of human form. One of them was rolling his sightless face monotonously to and fro, pouring out an unceasing stream of delirious talk. The other, whose bright eyes met the newcomer's with eager longing, paused in the murmur which seemed to ease his pain, and whispered 'Doctor!' so hopefully that the sound went straight to Lindo's heart.

To undeceive him, and to explain to the others that he was not the expected surgeon, was a bitter task with which to begin his ministrations; but he was greatly cheered to find that, even in their disappointment, they took his coming as a kindly thing, and eyed him with surprised gratitude. He told them the latest news from the bank—that a cage would be rigged up in a few hours at farthest—and then, conquering his physical shrinking, he knelt down by the least injured man and tried to turn his surgical knowledge to account. It was not much

he could do, but it eased the poor man's present sufferings. A bandage was laid more smoothly here, a little cotton-wool readjusted there, a change of posture managed, a few hopeful words uttered which helped the patient to fight against the shock—so that presently he sank into a troubled sleep. Lindo tried to do his best for the other also, terrible as was the task; but the man's excitement and unceasing restlessness, as well as his more serious injuries, made help here of little avail.

When he rose, he found one of the watchers holding a cup of brandy ready for him; and, sitting down upon the bench behind, he discovered a coat laid there to make the seat more comfortable, though no one seemed to have done it or to be conscious of his surprise. They talked low to him, and to one another, in a disjointed taciturn fashion, with immense gaps and long intervals of silence. He learned that there were twenty-seven men yet missing, but it was thought that the afterdamp had killed them all. Those already found alive had been in the main heading, where the current of air gave them a better chance.

One or other of the workers was continually going out to listen for the return of the party who were exploring the workings near the foot of the other shaft; and once or twice a member of this party, exhausted or ill, looked in for a dose of tea or brandy, and then stumbled out again to get himself conveyed to the upper air. These looked curiously at the stranger, but, on some information being muttered in their ears, made a point on going

out of giving him a nod which was full of tacit acknowledgment.

In a quiet interval he looked at his watch and wound it up, finding the time to be half-past two. The familiar action carried his mind back to his neat, spotless bedroom at the rectory and the cares and anxieties of everyday life, which had been forgotten for the last five hours. Could it be so short a time, he asked himself, since he was troubled by them? It seemed years ago. It seemed as if a gulf, deep as the shaft down which he had come, divided him from them. And yet the moment his thoughts returned to them the gulf became less, and presently, although his eyes were still fixed upon the poor collier's unquiet head and the murky cabin with its smoky lamp, he was really back in Claversham, busied with those thoughts again, and pondering on the time when he should be above-ground. The things that had been important before rose into importance again, but their relative values were altered, in his eyes at any rate. With what he had seen and heard in the last few hours fresh in his mind, with the injured men lying still in his sight—one of them never to see the sun again—he could not but take a different, a wider, a less selfish view of life and its aims. His ideal of existence grew higher and purer, his notion of success more noble. In the light of his own self-forgetting energy and of others' pain he saw things as they affected his neighbour rather than himself; and so presently—not in haste, but slowly, in the watches of the night—he formed a resolution which shall be told

presently. The determinations to which men come at such times are, in nine cases out of ten, as transitory as the emotions on which they are based. But this time, and with this man, it was not to be so. Kate Bonamy's words, bringing before his mind the responsibility which rested upon him, had in a degree prepared him to examine his position gravely and from a lofty standpoint; so that the considerations which now occurred to him could scarcely fail to have due and lasting weight with him, and to leave impressions both deep and permanent.

He was presently roused from his reverie by a sound which caused his companions to rise to their feet and exhibit, for the first time, some excitement. It was the murmur of voices in the heading, which, beginning far away, rapidly approached and gathered strength. Going to the door of the cabin, he saw lights in the gallery becoming each instant more clear. Then the forms of men coming on by twos and threes rose out of the darkness. And so the procession wound in, and Lindo found himself suddenly surrounded—where a moment before no sounds but painful ones had been heard—by the hum and bustle, the quick questions and answers, of a crowd. For the men brought good news. The missing were found. Though many of them were burned or scorched, and others were suffering from the effects of the afterdamp, the explorers brought back with them no still, ominous burden, nor even any case of hopeless injury, such as that of the poor fellow in delirium, over whom his mates bent with the strange impassive patience which

seems to be a quality peculiar to those who get their living underground.

Not that Lindo at the time had leisure to consider their behaviour. The injured were brought to him as a matter of course, and he did what he could with simple bandages and liniment to keep the air from their wounds and to enable the men to reach the surface with as little pain as possible. For more than an hour, as he passed from one to the other, his hands were never empty; he could think only of his work. The deputy-manager, who had been leading the rescue party, was thoroughly prostrated. The rest never doubted that the stranger was a surgeon, and it was curious to see their surprise when the general taciturnity allowed the fact that he was only a parson to leak out. They were like savants with a specimen which, known to belong to a particular species, has none of the class attributes, and sets at defiance all preconceived ideas upon the subject. He, too, when he was at length free to look about him, found matter for astonishment in his own sensations. The cabin and the roadway outside, where the men sat patiently waiting their turns to ascend, had become almost homelike in his eyes. The lounging figures here thrown into relief by a score of lamps, there lost in the gloom of the background, had grown familiar. He knew that this was here and that was there, and had his receptacles and conveniences, his special attendants and helpers. In a word, he had made the place his own, yet without forgetting old habits—for more than once he

caught himself looking at his watch, and wondering when it would be day.

Towards seven o'clock a message directed to him by name came down. A cage would be rigged up within the hour. Before that period elapsed, however, he was summoned to be present at the death of the poor fellow who had been delirious since he was found, and who now passed away in the same state. It was a trying scene, coming just when the clergyman's wrought-up nerves were beginning to feel a reaction—the more trying as all looked to him to do anything that could be done. But that was nothing; and he felt gravely thankful when the poor man's sufferings were over, and the throng of swarthy faces melted from the open doorway.

He sat apart a while after that, until a commotion outside the cabin and a cheery voice asking for Mr. Lindo summoned him to the door, where he found the manager who had sent him down the night before, and who now greeted him warmly. 'It is not for me to thank you,' Mr. Peat said—'I have nothing to do with this pit. The owner, to whom what has happened will be reported, will do that; but personally I am obliged to you, Mr. Lindo, and I am sure the men are.'

'I wanted only to be of help,' the clergyman answered simply. 'There was not much I could do.'

'Well, that is a matter of opinion,' the manager replied. 'I have mine, and I know that the men who have come up have theirs. However, here is

the cage ; perhaps you will not mind going up with poor Edwards ? ’

‘ Not at all,’ said the rector ; and, following the manager to the cage, he stepped into it without any suspicion that this was a trick on the part of Mr. Peat to ensure his volunteer’s services being recognised.

He found the ascent a very different thing from the descent. The steady upward motion was not unpleasant, and long before the surface was reached his eyes, accustomed to darkness, detected a pale gleam of light stealing downwards, and could distinguish the damp brickwork gliding by. Presently the light grew stronger—grew dazzling in its wonderful whiteness. ‘ We are going up nicely,’ his companion murmured, remembering in his gratitude that the ascent, which was a trifle to him even with shattered nerves, might be unpleasant to the other—‘ we are nearly there.’

And so they were ; and slowly and gently they rose into the broad daylight and the sunshine, which seemed to proclaim to the rector’s heart that sorrow may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Standing densely packed round the pit’s mouth was a great crowd—a crowd, at any rate, of many hundreds. They greeted the appearance of the cage with a quick drawing-in of the breath and a murmur of pity. Lindo’s face and hands were as black as any collier’s ; his dress seemed at the first glance as theirs. But as he helped to lift his injured companion out and carry him to

the stretcher which stood at hand, the word ran round who he was ; and, though no one spoke, the loudest tribute would scarcely have been more eloquent than the respect with which the rough assemblage fell away to right and left that he might pass out to the gig which had been thoughtfully provided—first to carry him to the vicarage for a wash, and afterwards to take him home. His heart was full as he walked down the lane, every man standing uncovered, and the women gazing on him with unspoken blessings in their eyes.

A very few hours before he had felt at war with the world. He had said, not perhaps that all men were liars, but that they were unjust, full of prejudice and narrowness and ill-will ; that, above all, they judged without charity. Now, as the pony-cart rattled down the road through the cutting, and the sunny landscape, the winding river, and the plain round Claversham opened before him, he felt far otherwise. He longed to do more for others than he had done. He dwelt with wonder on the gratitude which services so slight had evoked from men so rough as those from whom he had just parted. And unconsciously he placed the balance in their favour to the general account of the world, and acknowledged himself its debtor.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RECTOR'S DECISION

THE church clock was striking nine as the rector, jogging along behind the little pony, came in sight of the turnpike-house outside the town. He had no overcoat, and the drive had chilled him; and, anxious at once to warm himself and to reach the rectory as quietly as possible, he bade the driver stop at the gate and set him down. The lad had been strictly charged to see the parson home, and would have demurred, but Lindo persisted good-humouredly, and had his way. In two minutes he was striding briskly along the road, his shoulders squared, and the night's reflections still running like a rich purple thread through the common stuff of his everyday thoughts.

In this mood, which the pure morning air and crisp sunshine tended to favour and prolong, he came at a corner plump upon Mr. Bonamy, who, like all angular, uncomfortable men, was an early riser, and had this morning chosen to extend his before-breakfast walk in the direction of Baerton. The lawyer's energy had already been rewarded. He had met Mr. Keogh, and learned not only the

earlier details of the accident—which were, indeed, known to all Claversham, for the town had sat up into the small hours listening for wheels and discussing the catastrophe—but had further received a minute description of the rector's conduct. Consequently his thoughts were already busy with the clergyman when, turning a corner, he came unexpectedly upon him.

Lindo met his glance and looked away hastily. The rector had been anxious to avoid, by going home at once, any appearance of parading what he had done, and he would have passed on with a brief good-morning. But the lawyer seemed to be differently disposed. He stopped short in the middle of the path, so that the clergyman could not pass him without rudeness, and nodded a jerky greeting. 'You have not walked all the way, I suppose, Mr. Lindo?' he said, his keen small eyes reading the other's face like a book.

'No,' the rector answered, colouring uncomfortably under his gaze. 'I drove as far as the turnpike, Mr. Bonamy.'

'Well, you may think yourself lucky to be well out of it,' the lawyer rejoined with a dry smile. 'To be here at all, indeed,' he continued, with a gesture of the hand which seemed meant to indicate the sunshine and the upper air. 'When a man does a foolhardy thing he does not always escape, you know.'

The younger man reddened. But this morning he had his temper well under control; and he merely answered, 'I thought I was called upon to

do what I did, Mr. Bonamy. But of course that is a matter of opinion. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps right. I did what I thought best at the moment, and I am satisfied.'

Mr. Bonamy shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, well, every man to his notion,' he said. 'I do not approve, myself, of people running risks which do not lie within the scope of their business. And as nothing has happened to you——'

'The risk of anything happening,' the rector rejoined, with warmth, 'was so small that the thing is not worth discussing, Mr. Bonamy. There is a matter, however,' he continued, changing the subject on a sudden impulse, 'which I think I may as well mention to you now as later. You, as churchwarden, have, in fact, a right to be informed of it. I——'

'You are cold,' said Mr. Bonamy abruptly. 'Allow me to turn with you.'

The rector bowed and complied. The request, however, had checked the current of his speech, even the current of his thoughts, and he did not finish his sentence. He felt, indeed, for a moment a temptation as sudden as it was strong. He saw at a glance what his resolve meant. He discerned that what had appeared to him in the isolation of the night an act of dignified self-surrender must, and would, seem to others an acknowledgment of defeat—almost an acknowledgment of dishonour. He recalled, as in a flash, all the episodes of the struggle between himself and his companion. And he pictured the latter's triumph. He wavered.

But the events of the last eighteen hours had not been lost upon him, and, after a brief hesitation, he set the seal on his purpose. 'You are aware, I know, Mr. Bonamy,' he said, with an effort, 'of the circumstances under which, in Lord Dynmore's absence, I accepted the living here.'

'Perfectly,' said the lawyer drily.

'He has made those circumstances the subject of a grave charge against me,' the rector continued, a touch of hauteur in his tone. 'That you have heard also, I know. Well, I desire to say once more that I repudiate that charge in the fullest and widest sense.'

'So I understand,' Mr. Bonamy murmured. He walked along by his companion's side, his face set and inscrutable. If he felt any surprise at the communication now being made to him, he had the skill to hide it.

'I repudiate it, you understand!' the clergyman repeated, stepping out more quickly in his excitement, and glaring angrily into vacancy. 'It is a false and wicked charge! But it does not affect me. I do not care a jot for it. It does not in any sense force me to do what I am going to do. If that were all, I should not dream of resigning the living, but, on the contrary, would hold it, as a few days ago I had determined to hold it, in the face of all opposition. However,' he continued, lowering his tone, 'I have now examined my position in regard to the parish rather than the patron, and I have come to a different conclusion, Mr. Bonamy—namely, to place my resignation in the proper hands as speedily as possible.'

Mr. Bonamy nodded gently and silently. He did not speak, he did not even look at the clergyman; and this placid acquiescence irritated the young man into adding a word he had not intended to say. 'I tell you this as my churchwarden, Mr. Bonamy,' he continued stiffly, 'and not as desiring or expecting any word of sympathy or regret from you. On the contrary,' he added, with some bitterness, 'I am aware that my departure can be only a relief to you. We have been opposed to one another since my first day here.'

'Very true,' said Mr. Bonamy, nodding placidly. 'I suppose you have considered——'

'What?'

'The effect which last night's work may have on the relations between you and Lord Dynmore?'

'I do not understand you,' the rector answered haughtily, and yet with some wonder. 'What did the man mean?'

'You know, I suppose,' Mr. Bonamy retorted, turning slightly so as to command a view of his companion's face, 'that he is the owner of the Big Pit at Baerton from which you have just come?'

'Lord Dynmore is?'

'To be sure.'

A flush of crimson swept over the rector's brow and left him red and frowning. 'I did not know that!' he said, his teeth set together.

'So I perceive,' the lawyer replied, with a nod, as they turned into the churchyard. 'But I can reassure you. It is not at all likely to affect the earl's plans. He is an obstinate man, though in

some points a good-natured one, and he will most certainly accept your resignation if you send it in. But here you are at home.' He paused, standing awkwardly by the clergyman's side. At last he added, 'It is a comfortable house. I do not think that there is a more comfortable house in Claver-sham.'

He retired a few steps into the churchyard as he spoke, and stood looking up at the massive old-fashioned front of the rectory, as if he had never seen the house before. The clergyman, anxious to be indoors and alone, shot an impatient glance at him, and waited for him to go. But he did not go, and presently something in his intent gaze drew Lindo, too, into the churchyard, and the two ill-assorted companions looked up together at the old grey house. The early sun shone aslant on it, burnishing the half-open windows. In the porch a robin was hopping to and fro. 'It is a comfortable, roomy house,' the lawyer repeated.

'It is,' the rector answered—slowly, as if the words were wrung from him. And he, too, stood locking up at it as if he were fascinated.

'A man might grow old in it,' murmured Mr. Bonamy. There was a slight, but very unusual, flush on his parchment-coloured face, and his eyes, when he turned with an abrupt movement to his companion, did not rise above the latter's waistcoat. 'Comfortably too, I should say,' he added querulously, rattling the money in his pockets. 'I think if I were you I would reconsider my determination. I think I would, do you know? As it is, what you

have told me will not go any further. You did one foolish thing last night. I would not do another to-day, if I were you, Mr. Lindo.'

With that he turned abruptly away—his head down, his coat-tails swinging, and both his hands thrust deep into his trouser-pockets—such a shrewd, angular, ungainly figure as only a small country town can show. He left the rector standing before his rectory in a state of profound surprise and bewilderment. The young man felt something very like a lump in his throat as he turned to go in. He discerned that the lawyer had meant to do a kind, nay, a generous action; and yet if there was a man in the world whom he had judged incapable of such magnanimity it was Mr. Bonamy! He went in not only touched, but ashamed. Here, if he had not already persuaded himself that the world was less ill-conditioned than he had lately thought it, was another and a surprising lesson!

Meanwhile Mr. Bonamy went home in haste, and finding his family already at breakfast, sat down to the meal in a very snappish humour. The girls were quick to detect the cloud on his brow, and promptly supplied his wants, forbearing, whatever their curiosity, to make any present attempt to satisfy it. Jack was either less observant or more hardy. He remarked that Mr. Bonamy was late, and elicited only a grunt. A further statement that the morning was more like April than February gained no answer at all. Still undismayed, Jack tried again, plunging into the subject which the

three had been discussing before the lawyer entered. 'Did you hear anything of Lindo, sir?' he asked, buttering his toast.

'I saw him,' the lawyer said curtly.

'Was he all right?' Jack ventured.

'More right than he deserved to be!' Mr. Bonamy snarled. 'What right had he down the pit at all? Gregg did not go.'

'More shame to Gregg, I think!' Jack said.

Mr. Bonamy prudently shifted his ground, and got back to the rector. 'Well, all I can say is that a more foolish, reckless, useless piece of idiocy I never heard of in my life!' he declared in a tone of scorn.

'I call it glorious!' said Daintry, looking dreamily across the table and slowly withdrawing an egg-spoon from her mouth. 'I shall never say anything against him again.'

Mr. Bonamy looked at her for an instant as if he would annihilate her. And then he went on with his breakfast.

Apparently, however, the outburst had relieved him, for presently he began on his own account. 'Has your friend any private means?' he asked, casting an ungracious glance at the barrister, and returning at once to his buttered toast.

'Who? Lindo, do you mean?' Jack replied in surprise.

'Yes.'

'Something, I should say. Perhaps a hundred a year. Why?'

'Because, if that is all he has,' the lawyer

growled, buttering a fresh piece of toast and frowning at it savagely, 'I think that you had better see him and prevent him making a fool of himself. That is all.'

His tone meant more than his words expressed. Kate's eyes sought Jack's in alarm, only to be instantly averted. Though she had the urn before her, she turned red and white, and had to bury her face in her cup to hide her discomposure. Yet she need not have feared. Mr. Bonamy was otherwise engaged, and as for Jack, her embarrassment told him nothing of which he was not already aware. He knew that his service was and must be a thankless and barren service—that to him fell the empty part of the slave in the triumph. Had he not within the last few hours—when the news that the rector had descended the Big Pit to tend the wounded and comfort the dying first reached the town, and a dozen voices were loud in his praise—had he not seen Kate's face now bright with triumph and now melting with tender anxiety? Had he not felt a bitter pang of jealousy as he listened to his friend's praises? and had he not crushed down the feeling manfully, bravely, heroically, and spoken as loudly, ay, and as cordially after an instant's effort, as the most fervent?

Yes, he had done all this and suffered all this, being one of those who believe that

Loyalty is still the same,
Whether it win or lose the game;
True as the dial to the sun,
Although it be not shone upon.

And he was not going to flinch now. He put no more questions to Mr. Bonamy, but, when breakfast was finished, he got up and went out. It needed not the covert glance which he shot at Kate as he disappeared, to assure her that he was going about her unspoken errand.

Five minutes saw him face to face with the rector on the latter's hearthrug. Or, rather, to be accurate, five minutes saw him staring, irate and astonished, at his host, while Lindo, with one foot on the fender and his eyes on the fire, seemed very willing to avoid his gaze. 'You have made up your mind to resign!' Jack exclaimed, in accents almost awe-stricken. 'You are joking!'

But the rector, still looking down, shook his head. 'No, Jack, I am not,' he said slowly. 'I am in earnest.'

'Then may I ask when you came to this extraordinary resolution?' the barrister retorted hotly. 'And why?'

'Last night; and because—well, because I thought it right,' was the answer.

'You thought it right?'

Jack's tone was a fine mixture of wonder, contempt, and offence. It made Lindo wince, but it did not shake his resolution. 'Yes,' he said firmly. 'That is so.'

'And that is all you are going to tell me, is it? You put yourself in my hands a few days ago. You took my advice and acted upon it, and now, without a word of explanation, you throw me over! Good heavens! I have no patience with you!'

In his indignation Jack began to walk up and down the room. 'Is not the position the same to-day as yesterday? Tell me that.'

'Well,' the rector began, turning and speaking slowly, 'the truth is——'

'No!' cried the barrister, interrupting him ruthlessly. 'Tell me this first. Is not the position the same to-day as yesterday?'

'It is, but the view I take of it is different,' the young clergyman answered earnestly. 'Let me explain, Smith. When I agreed with you a few days ago that the proper course for me to follow, the course which would most fitly assert my honesty and good faith, was to retain the living in spite of threats and opposition, I had my own interests and my own dignity chiefly in view. I looked upon the question as one solely between Lord Dynmore and myself; and I felt, rightly as I still think, that, as a man falsely accused by another man, I had a right to repel the charge by the only practical means in my power—by maintaining my position and defying him to do his worst.'

He paused.

'Well?' said Jack drily.

But the rector did not continue at once, and when he did speak it was with evident effort. He first went back to the fire, and stood gazing into it in the old attitude, with his head slightly bowed and his foot on the fender. The posture was one of humility, and so far unlike the man, that it struck Jack and touched him strangely. At last Lindo did continue. 'Well, you see,' he said

slowly, 'that was all right as far as it went. My mistake lay in taking too narrow a view. I thought only of myself and Lord Dynmore, when I should have been thinking of the parish and of—a word I know you are not very fond of—the Church. I should have remembered that with this accusation hanging over me I could not hope to do much good among my people; and that to many of them I should seem an interloper, a man clinging obstinately to something not his own nor fairly acquired. In a word, I ought to have remembered that for the future I should be useless for good and might, on the other hand, become a stumbling-block and occasion for scandal—both inside the parish and outside. You see what I mean, I am sure.'

'I see,' quoth Jack contemptuously, 'that you need a great many words to make out your case. What I do not think you have considered is the inference which will be drawn from your resignation—you will be taken to have confessed yourself in the wrong.'

'I cannot help that.'

'Will not that be a scandal?'

'It will, at any rate, be one soon forgotten.'

'Now, I tell you what!' Jack exclaimed, standing still and confronting the other with the air of a man bent on speaking his mind though the heavens should fall. 'This is just a piece of absurd quixotism, Lindo. You are a poor man, without means and without influence; and you are going, for the sake of a foolish idea—a mere specu-

lative scruple—to give up an income and a house and a useful sphere of work such as you will never get again! You are going to do that, and go back—to what? To a miserable curacy—don't wince, my friend, for that is what you are going to do—and an income one-fifth of that which you have been spending for the last six months! Now the sole question is, are you quite an idiot?’

‘You are pretty plain-spoken,’ said the rector, smiling feebly.

‘I mean to be!’ was Jack's uncompromising retort. ‘I have asked you, and I want an answer—are you a fool?’

‘I hope not.’

‘Then you will give up this fool's notion?’ Jack replied viciously.

But the rector's only answer was a shake of the head. He did not look round. Had he done so, he would have seen that, though Jack's keen face was flushed with anger and annoyance, his eyes were moist and wore an expression very much at variance with his tone.

He missed that, however; and Jack made one more attempt. ‘Look here,’ he said bluntly; ‘have you considered that if you stop you will find your path a good deal smoothed by last night's work?’

‘No, I have not,’ the rector answered stubbornly.

‘Well, you will find it so, you may be sure of that! Why, man alive!’ Jack continued with vehemence, ‘you are going to be the hero of the

place for the time. No one will believe anything against you, except perhaps Gregg and a few beasts of his kind. Whereas, if you go now, do you know who will get your berth ?'

'No.'

Jack rapped out the name. 'Clode! Clode, and no one else, I will be bound !' he said. 'And you do not love him.'

The rector had not expected the reply. He started, and, removing his foot from the fender, turned sharply so as to face his friend. 'No,' he said slowly and reluctantly, 'I do not think I do like him. I consider that he has behaved badly, Jack. He has not stood by me as he should have done, or as I would have stood by him had our positions been reversed. I do not think he has called here once since the bazaar, except on business, and then I was out. I had planned, indeed, to see him to-day and ask him what it meant, and, if I found he had come to an adverse opinion in my matter, to give him notice. But now——'

'You will make him a present of the living instead,' Jack said grimly.

'I do not know why he should get it,' the rector answered, with a frown, 'more than anyone else.'

'It is the common report that he will,' Jack retorted. 'As for that, however——'

But why follow him through all the resources of his art? He put forth every effort—perhaps against his own better judgment, for a man will do for his friend what he will not do for himself—to

persuade the rector to recall his decision. And he failed. He succeeded, indeed, in wringing the young clergyman's heart and making him wince at the thought of his barren future and his curate's triumph; but there his success ended. He made no progress towards inducing him to change his mind; and presently he found that all the arguments he advanced were met by a set formula, to which the rector seemed to cling as in self-defence.

'It is no good, Jack,' he answered—and if he said it once, he said it half a dozen times—'it is no good! I cannot take anyone's advice on this subject. The responsibility is mine, and I cannot shift it! I must try to do right according to my own conscience!'

Jack did not know that the words were Kate's, and that every time the rector repeated them he had Kate in his mind. But he saw that they were unanswerable; and when he had listened to them for the sixth time he took up his hat in a huff. 'Well, have your own way!' he said, turning away. 'After all, you are right. It is your business, and not mine. Give Clode the living if you like!'

And he went out sharply.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CURATE HEARS THE NEWS

SELDOM, if ever, had the curate passed a week so harassing as that which was ushered in by the bazaar, and was destined to end—though he did not know this—in the colliery accident. During these seven days he managed to run through a perfect gamut of feelings. He rose each day in a different mood. One day he was hopeful, confident, assured of success; the next fearful, despondent, inclined to give up all for lost. One day he went about telling himself that the rector would not resign; that he would not himself resign in his place; that people were mad to say he would; that men do not resign livings so easily; that the very circumstances of the case must compel the rector to stand his ground. The next he saw everything in a different light. He appreciated the impossibility of a man attacked on so many sides maintaining his position for any length of time; and counted the rector's cause as lost already. One hour he bitterly regretted that he had cut himself off from his chief; the next he congratulated himself as sincerely on being untrammelled by

any but a formal bond. Why, people might even have expected him, had he strongly supported the rector, to refuse the living.

He saw Laura several times during the week, but he did not open to her the extent of his hopes and fears. He shrank from doing so out of a natural prudent reticence; which after all meant only the refraining from putting into words things perfectly understood by both. To some extent he kept up between them the thin veil of appearances, which many who go through life in closest companionship preserve to the end, though each has long ago found it transparent. But though he said nothing, confining the tumult of his feelings to his own breast, he was not blind, and he soon perceived that Laura shared his suspense, and was watching the rector's fortunes with an interest as selfish and an eye as cold as his own. Which, far from displeasing him, rather increased his ardour.

As the days passed by, however, bringing only the sickness of hope deferred and tidings of the rector's sturdy determination to hold what he had got, the curate began, not in a mere passing mood, but on grounds of reason and calculation, to lose hope. Every tongue in the town was wagging about Lindo. My lord was, or was supposed to be, setting the engines of the law in motion. Mr. Bonamy was believed, probably with less reason, to be contemplating an appeal to the bishop and the Court of Arches. In a word, all the misfortunes which Clode had foreseen were accumulating about the devoted head; and yet—and yet it was

a question whether the owner of the head was a penny the worse! Perhaps some day he might be. The earl was a great man, with a long purse, and he might yet have his way. But this was not likely to happen, as the curate now began to see, until long after the Rev. Stephen Clode's connection with the parish and claim upon the living should have become things of the past.

On the top of this conviction, which sufficiently depressed him, came the news of the colliery accident—news which did not reach him until late at night. It plunged him into the depths of despair. He cursed the ill-luck which had withheld from him the opportunity of distinguishing himself, and had granted it to the rector. He saw how fatally the affair would strengthen the latter's hands. And in effect he gave up. He resigned himself to despair. He had not the spirit to go out, but sat until long after noon, brooding miserably over the fire, his table littered with unremoved breakfast things, and his mind in a similar state of slovenly disorder. That was a day, a miserable day, he long remembered.

About half-past two he made an effort to pull himself together. Mechanically putting a book in his pocket, he took his hat and went out, with the intention of paying two or three visits in his district. He had pride enough left to excite him to the effort, and sufficient sense to recognise its supreme importance. But, even so, before he reached the street he was dreaming again—the old dreary dreams. He started when a voice behind

him said brusquely, 'Going your rounds, I see! Well, there is nothing like sticking to business, whatever is on foot. Shall I have to congratulate you this time?'

He knew the voice and turned round, a scowl on his dark face. The speaker was Gregg—Gregg wearing an air of unusual jauntiness and gaiety. It fell from him, however, as he met the curate's eyes, leaving him, metaphorically speaking, naked and ashamed. The doctor stood in wholesome dread of the curate's sharp tongue and biting irony, nor would he have accosted him in so free-and-easy a manner now, had he not been a little lifted above himself by something he had just learned.

'Congratulate me? What do you mean?' Clode replied, turning on him with the uncompromising directness which is more 'upsetting' to a man uncertain of himself than any retort, however discourteous.

'What do I mean?' the doctor answered, striving to cover his discomfiture with a feeble smile. 'Well, no harm, at any rate, Clode. I hope I shall have to congratulate you. But if you are going to——'

'On what?' interrupted the curate sternly. 'On what are you going to congratulate me?'

'Haven't you heard the news?' Gregg said in surprise.

'What news? Of the pit accident?' Clode answered, restraining with difficulty a terrible outburst of passion. 'Why, I should think there is not

a fool within three counties has not heard it by this time!'

He almost swore at the man, and was turning away, when something in the doctor's 'No, no!' struck him, excited as he was, as peculiar. 'Then, what is it?' he said, hanging on his heel, half curious and half in scorn.

'You have not heard about the rector?'

The curate glared. 'About the rector?' he said in a mechanical way. A sudden stillness fell on his face and tone at mention of the name. 'No, what of him?' he continued, after another pause.

'You have not heard that he is resigning?' Gregg asked.

The curate's eyes flashed with returning anger. 'No,' he said grimly. 'Nor anyone else out of Bedlam!'

'But it is so! It is true, I tell you!' the doctor answered in the excitement of conviction. 'I have just seen a man who had it from the archdeacon, who left the rectory not an hour ago. He is going to resign at once.'

The curate did not again deny the truth of the story. But he seemed to Gregg, watching eagerly for some sign of appreciation, to take the news coolly, considering how important it was to him. He stood silent a moment, looking thoughtfully down the street, and then shrugged his shoulders. That was all. Gregg did not see the little pulse which began to beat so furiously and suddenly in his cheek, nor hear the buzzing which for a few

seconds rendered him deaf to the shrill cries of the schoolboys playing among the pillars of the market-hall.

‘Mr. Lindo has changed his mind since yesterday, then,’ Clode said at last, speaking in his ordinary, rather contemptuous tone.

‘Yes, I heard he was talking big then,’ replied the doctor, delighted with his success. ‘Defying the earl, and all the rest of it. That was quite in his line. But I never heard that much came of his talking. However, you are bound to stick up for him, I suppose!’

The curate frowned a little at that—why, the doctor did not understand—and then the two parted. Gregg went on his way to carry the news to others, and Clode, after standing a moment in thought, turned his steps towards the Town House. The sky had grown cloudy, the day cold and raw. The leafless avenue and silent shrubberies through which he strode presented but a wintry prospect to the common eye, but for him the air was full of sunshine and green leaves and the songs of birds. From despair to hope, from a prison to a palace, he had leapt at a single bound. In the first intoxication of confidence he could even spare a moment to regret that his hands were not *quite* clean. He felt a passing remorse for the doing of one or two things, as needless, it now turned out, as they had been questionable. Nay, he could afford to shudder, with a luxurious sense of danger safely passed, at the risks he had been so foolish as to run; thanking Providence that his folly had not landed him,

as he now saw that it easily might have landed him, in such trouble as would have effectually tripped up his rising fortunes.

He reached the Town House in a perfect glow of moral worth and self-gratulation, and he was already half-way across the drawing-room before he perceived that it contained, besides Mrs. Hammond and her daughter, a third person. The third person was the rector. Except in church the two men had not met since the day of the bazaar, and both were unpleasantly surprised. Lindo rose slowly from a seat in one of the windows, and, without stepping forward, stood silently looking at his curate, as one requiring an explanation, not offering a greeting; while Clode felt something of a shock, for he discerned at once that the situation would admit of no half-measures. In the presence of Mrs. Hammond, to whom he had expressed his view of the rector's conduct, he could not adopt the cautious apologetic tone which he would probably have used had he met Lindo alone. He was fairly caught. But he was not a coward, and before the tell-tale flush had well mounted to his brow he had determined on his *rôle*. Half-way across the room he stopped, and looked at Mrs. Hammond. 'I thought you were alone,' he said with an air of constraint, partly real, partly assumed.

'There is only the rector here,' she answered bluntly. And then she added, with a little spice of malice, for Mr. Clode had not been a favourite with her since his defection, 'I suppose you are not afraid to meet him?'

‘Certainly not,’ the curate answered, thus challenged. And he turned haughtily to meet the rector’s angry gaze. ‘I am not aware that I have any need to be. I am glad to see that you are none the worse for your gallant conduct last night,’ he added with perfect *aplomb*.

‘Thank you,’ Lindo answered, choking down his indignation with an effort. For a week—for a whole week—this, his chosen lieutenant, had not been near him in his trouble! ‘I am much obliged to you,’ he continued, ‘but I am rather surprised that your anxiety on my account did not lead you to come and see me at the rectory.’

‘I called, and failed to find you,’ Clode answered, sitting resolutely down.

Lindo followed his example. ‘I believe you did once,’ he replied contemptuously. Had a friend been about to succeed him, he could have borne even to congratulate him. But the thought of this man entering on the enjoyment of all the good things he was resigning was well-nigh unendurable. Though he knew that it would best consort with his dignity to be silent, he could not refrain from pursuing the subject. ‘You thought,’ he went on, the same gibe in his tone, ‘that a non-committal policy was best, I suppose?’

The curate for a moment sat silent, his dark face glowing with resentment. ‘If you mean,’ he said at last, neither Mrs. Hammond nor her daughter venturing to interfere—the former because she thought he was only getting his deserts, and the latter because she felt no call to champion him

at present—‘if you mean that I did not wish to publish my opinion, you are right, Mr. Lindo.’

‘I think you published it sufficiently for your purpose!’ the young rector retorted with bitterness.

‘Then why throw my non-committal policy in my teeth?’ replied the curate deftly, thereby winning at least a logical victory.

Lindo sneered and grew, of course, twice as angry as before. ‘Very neatly put!’ he said. ‘I do not doubt that you would have got out of your confession of faith—or lack of faith—as cleverly, if circumstances had required it.’

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Miss Hammond rose in a marked way and left the room; while Clode for a moment glared at him as though he would resent the insult—for it was little less—in a practical manner. Fortunately the curate’s calculating brain told him that nothing could be gained by this, and with an admirable show of patience and forbearance he waved the words aside. ‘I really do not understand you,’ he said with a maddening air of superiority. ‘I cannot be blamed for having formed an opinion of my own on a subject which affected me. Then, having formed it, what was I to do? Publish it, or keep it to myself? As a fact, I did not publish it.’

‘Except by your acts,’ said the rector.

‘Take it that way, then,’ the curate replied, still with patience. ‘Do I gather that you would have had me, though I held an opinion adverse to you, come to you as before, be about you, treat you in all re-

spects as if I were on your side? Is that your complaint—that I did not play the hypocrite?’

The rector felt that he was fairly defeated and out-manceuvred; so much so that Mrs. Hammond, whose sympathies were entirely on his side, expected him to break into a furious passion. But the very skill and coolness of his adversary acted as a warning and an example, and by a mighty effort he controlled himself. He rose from his chair with outward calmness, and, saying contemptuously, ‘Well, I am glad that I know what your opinion is—an open foe is less dangerous than a secret one,’ he turned from Clode. Holding out his hand to his hostess, he muttered some form of leave-taking, and walked out of the room with as much dignity as he could muster. He had certainly had the worst of the encounter.

And he felt very bitter about it as he crossed the Top of the Town. Whether the curate knew of his intention of resigning or not, his conduct in turning upon him and openly expressing his disbelief in his honesty was alike cruel and brutal. The man was false. The rector felt sure of it. But the pain which he experienced on this account—the pain of a generous man misunderstood and ill-requited—soon gave way to self-reproach. He had brought the thing on himself by his indiscreet passion. He had acted like a boy! He was not fit to be in a responsible position!

While he was still full of this, chewing the cud of his imprudence, he saw a slender figure, which he recognised, crossing the street a little way before

him. He knew it at the first glance. In a moment he recognised the graceful lines, the half-proud, half-gentle carriage of the head, the glint of the cold February sun in the fair hair. It was Kate Bonamy; and the rector, as he increased his pace, became conscious, with something like a shock, of the pleasure it gave him to see her, though he had parted from her not twenty-four hours before. In a moment he was at her side, and she, turning suddenly, saw him with a start of glad surprise. 'Mr. Lindo!' she stammered, holding out her hand before he offered his, and uttering the first words which rose to her lips, 'I am so glad!'

She was thinking of the pit accident, of the risk and his safety, and perhaps a little of his good name. And he understood. But he affected not to do so. 'Are you indeed, Miss Bonamy?' he answered. 'Glad that I am going?'

His eyes met hers, and then both his and hers fell. 'No,' she said gently and slowly. 'But I am very glad, Mr. Lindo, that you have done what seemed right to you without considering your own advantage.'

'I have done a great deal since I saw you yesterday,' he answered, taking refuge in a jest.

'You have, indeed.'

'Including taking your advice.'

'I am quite sure you had made up your mind before you asked my opinion,' she answered earnestly.

'No,' he said, 'I am sure I had not. It was your hint which led me to think the position out

from the beginning. When I did so, it struck me that, irritated by Lord Dynmore's words and manner, I had considered the question only as it affected him and myself. Going on to think of the parish, I came to the conclusion that I was quite unfit for the position.'

Kate started. The end of his sentence was a surprise to her. They were walking along side by side now—very slowly—and she looked at him, mute interrogation in her eyes.

'I am too young,' he said. 'Your father, you know, was of that opinion from the first.'

'Oh, but'—she answered hurriedly, 'I——'

'You do not think so?' he said with a droll glance. 'Well, I am glad of that. What? You were not going to say that, Miss Bonamy?'

'No,' she answered, blushing. 'I was going to say that my father's opinion might not now be the same, Mr. Lindo.'

'I expect it is. However, the opinion on which I acted was my own. I have a very hasty temper, do you know. This very afternoon I have been quarrelling, and have put my foot into it! I confess I thought when I came here that I could manage. Now I see I am not fit for it—for the living I mean.'

'Perhaps,' she answered slowly and in a low voice, 'you are the more fit because you feel unfit.'

'Well, I do not think I dare act on that,' he cried gaily. 'So you now see before you, Miss

Bonamy, a very humble personage—a kind of clerical man-of-all-work out of place! You do not know an incumbent of easy temper who wants a curate, do you?’

He spoke lightly, without any air of seeking or posing for admiration. Yet there was a little inflection of bitterness in his voice which did not escape her ear, and perhaps spoke to it—and to her heart—more loudly because it was not intended for either. She suddenly looked at him, and her face quivered, and then she looked away. But he had seen and understood. He marked the colour rising to the roots of her hair, and was as sure as if he had seen them that her eyes were wet with tears.

And then he knew. He felt a sudden answering yearning towards her, a forgetfulness of all her surroundings, and of all his surroundings save herself alone. What a fool, what an ingrate, what a senseless clod he had been, not to have seen months before—when it was in his power to win her, when he might have asked for something besides her pity, when he had something to offer her—that she was the fairest, purest, noblest of women? Now, when it was too late, and he had sacrificed all to a stupid conventionality, a social prejudice—what was her father to her save the natural crabbed foil of her grace and beauty—now he felt that he would give all, only he had nothing to give, to see her wide grey eyes grow dark with tenderness, and—and love.

Yes, love. That was it. He knew now. 'Miss Bonamy,' he said hurriedly. 'Will you——'

Kate started. 'Here is my cousin,' she said quietly, and yet with suspicious abruptness. 'I think he is looking for me, Mr. Lindo.'

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CUP AT THE LIP

THE ten days which followed the events just described were long remembered in Claversham with fondness and regret. The accident at Baerton, and the strange position of affairs at the rectory, falling out together, created intense excitement in the town. The gossips had for once as much to talk about as the idlest could wish, and found, indeed, so much to say on the one side and the other that the grocer, it was rumoured, ordered in a fresh supply of tea, and the two bakers worked double tides at making crumpets and Sally Luns, and still lagged behind the demand. Old Peggy from the almshouse hung about the churchyard half the day, noting who called at the rector's, and took as much interest in her task as if her weekly dole had depended on Mr. Lindo's fortunes. While everyone who could lay the least claim to knowing more than his neighbours became for the time the object of as many attentions as a London belle.

The archdeacon drove in and out daily. Once the rumour got abroad that he had gone to see Lord Dymore; and more than once it was said

that he was away at the palace conferring with the bishop. Those most concerned walked the streets with the faces of sphinxes. The curate and the rector were known to be on the most distant terms ; and to put an edge on curiosity, already keen, Mrs. Hammond was twice seen talking to Mr. Bonamy in the street.

Even the poor colliers' funeral, though a great number of the townsmen trooped out to the bleak little churchyard on Baer Hill to witness it--and to be rewarded by the sight of the young rector reading the service in the midst of a throng of bareheaded pitmen such as no Claversham eye had ever seen before—even this, which in ordinary times would have furnished food for talk for a month at least, went for little now. It was discussed indeed for an evening, and then recalled only for the sake of the light which it was supposed to throw upon Mr. Lindo's fate.

That gentleman, indeed, continued to present to the public an unmoved face. But in private, in the seclusion of his study—the lordly room which he had prized and appreciated from the first, taking its spacious dignity as the measure of his success—he wore no mask. There he had—as all men have, the man of destiny and the conscript alike—his solitary hours of courage and depression, anxiety and resignation. Of hope also ; for even now—let us not paint him greater than he was—he clung to the possibility that Lord Dynmore, whom everyone agreed in describing as irascible and hasty, but generous at bottom, would refuse to receive his

resignation of the living, and this in such terms as would enable him to remain without sacrificing his self-respect. There would be a victory indeed, and at times he could not help dwelling on the thought of it.

Consequently, when Mrs. Baxter, four days after the funeral, ushered in the archdeacon, and the young rector, turning at his writing-table, read his fate in the old gentleman's eyes, the news came upon him with crushing weight. Yet he did not give way. He rose and welcomed his visitor with a brave face. 'So the bearer of the bow-string has come at last!' he said lightly, as the two met on the hearthrug.

The archdeacon held his hand a few seconds longer than was necessary. 'Yes,' he said, 'I am afraid that is about what I am. I am sorry to bring you such news, Lindo—more sorry than I can tell you.' And, having got so far, he dropped his hat and picked it up again in a great hurry, and for a moment did not look at his companion.

'After all,' the rector said manfully, 'it is the only news I had a right to expect.'

'There is something in that,' the archdeacon admitted, sitting down. 'That is so, perhaps. All the same,' he went on, looking about him unhappily, and rubbing his head in ill-concealed irritation, 'if I had known how the earl would take it, I should not have advised you to make any concessions. No, I should not. But, there, he is an odd man—odder than I thought.'

'He accepts my offer to resign, of course?'

‘Yes.’

‘And that is all?’ the rector said, a little huskiness in his tone.

‘That is all,’ the archdeacon replied, rubbing his head again. It was plain that he had hard work to keep his vexation within bounds.

‘Well, I must not complain because he has taken me at my word,’ the rector said, recovering himself a little.

‘Well, I hoped the bishop might have had a word to say to it,’ the archdeacon grumbled. ‘But he had not, and I could not get to see his wife. He spoke very highly of your conduct, but he did not see his way clear, he said, to interfering.’

‘I scarcely see how he could,’ Lindo answered slowly.

‘Well, I do not know. Bonamy’s representation in the churchwardens’ names was very strong—very strong indeed, coming from them, you know.’

Lindo reddened. ‘There is an odd man for you, if you like,’ he said impulsively. He was glad, perhaps, to change the subject. ‘He has scarcely said a civil word to me since I came. He even began an action against me. Yet when this happened he turned round and in his way fought for me.’

‘Well, that is Bonamy all over!’ the archdeacon answered, almost with enthusiasm. ‘He is rough and crabbed, but he has the instincts of a gentleman, which are the greater credit to him, since he is a self-made man. I think I can tell you

something about him, though, which you do not know.'

'Indeed?' said Lindo mechanically.

'Yes. It has to do with your letter, too. I had it from Lord Dymore. In the first flush of his anger, it seems, he went to Bonamy and directed him to take the necessary steps to eject you. He is not the earl's solicitor, and he must have seen an excellent opportunity of getting hold of the Dymore business through this. He could not but see it. Nevertheless, he declined.'

'Why?' the rector asked shortly.

The archdeacon shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah! that I cannot say,' he answered. 'I only know that he did, putting forward some scruple or other which sent the earl off almost foaming with rage; and, of course, sent off with him Bonamy's chance of his business.'

'He is a strange man!' Lindo sighed as he spoke.

The archdeacon took a turn up the room. 'Now,' he said, coming back, 'I want to talk to you about another man.'

'Clode?' the rector muttered.

'Well, yes; you have guessed it,' the elder clergyman assented. 'The truth is, I am to offer him the living if you report well of him.'

'I do not like him,' Lindo said briefly.

'To be candid,' replied the other as briefly, 'neither do I, now.'

To that Lindo for a moment said nothing. The young man had fallen into an old attitude, and

stood with his foot on the fender, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the fire. His eyes grew hard, the line of his lips lengthened. He was passing through a temptation. Here was a brave vengeance ready to his hand. The man who had behaved badly, heartlessly, disloyally to him, who had taken part against him, and been hard and unfriendly from the moment of Lord Dymore's return, was now in his power. He had only to say that he distrusted Clode, that he suspected him of being unscrupulous, even that their connection had not been satisfactory to himself—and the thing was done. Clode would not have the living.

Yet he hesitated to say those words. He felt that the thing was a temptation. He remembered that Clode had worked well in the parish, and that his only offence was a private one. And, not at once, but after a pause, he gulped down the temptation, and, looking up with a flushed face, spoke. 'Yes,' he said, 'I must report well of him—in the parish, that is. He is a good worker. I am bound to say as much as that, I think.'

The archdeacon shrugged his shoulders once more. 'Right!' he said, with a certain curtness which hid his secret disgust. 'I suppose that is all, then. Will you come with me and tell him?'

'No,' the rector answered very decidedly, 'certainly I will not.'

'It will look well,' the other still suggested.

'No,' Lindo replied again, almost in anger, 'I cannot sincerely congratulate the man, and I will not!'

Nor would he budge from that resolve; and when the archdeacon called at the curate's lodgings a few minutes later, he called alone. The man he sought was out, however. 'Mr. Clode is at the Reading-Room, I think, sir,' the landlady said, with her deepest curtsy. And thither, accordingly, after a moment's hesitation, the archdeacon went.

The gas in the big, barely-furnished room, which we have visited more than once, had just been lit, but the blinds still remained up; and in this mingling of lights the place looked less home-like and more uncomfortable than usual. There were three people in the room when the archdeacon entered. Two sat reading by the fire, their backs to the door. The third—the future rector—was standing up near one of the windows, taking advantage of the last rays of daylight to read the 'Times,' which he held open before him. The archdeacon cast a casual glance at the others, and then stepped across to him and touched him on the shoulder.

Clode turned with a start. He had not heard the approaching footstep. One glance at the newcomer's face, however, set his blood in a glow. It told him, or almost told him, all; and instinctively he dropped his eyes, that the other might not read in them his triumph and exultation.

The archdeacon's first words confirmed him in his hopes. 'I have some good news for you, Mr. Clode,' he said, smiling benevolently. He had of late distrusted the curate, as we have seen; but he

was a man of kindly nature, and such a man cannot convey good tidings without entering into the recipient's feelings. 'I saw Lord Dynmore yesterday,' he continued.

'Indeed,' said the curate a little thickly. His face had grown hot, but the increasing darkness concealed this.

'Yes,' the archdeacon resumed, in a confidential tone which was yet pretty audible through the room. 'You have heard, no doubt, that Mr. Lindo has resigned the living?'

The curate nodded. At that moment he dared not speak. A dreadful thought was in his mind. What if the archdeacon's good news was news that the earl declined to receive the resignation? Some people might call that good news! The mere thought struck him dumb.

The archdeacon's next words resolved his doubts. 'Frankly,' the elder man continued in a genial tone, 'I am sorry—sorry that circumstances have forced him to take so extreme a step. But having said that, Mr. Clode, I have done for the present with regret, and may come to pleasanter matter. I have to congratulate you. I am happy to say that Lord Dynmore, whom I saw yesterday, has authorised me to offer the living to you.'

The newspaper rustled in the curate's grasp, and for a moment he did not answer. Then he said huskily, 'To me?'

'Yes,' the archdeacon answered expansively—it was certainly a pleasant task he had in hand, and he could not help beaming over it. 'To you, Mr.

Clode. On one condition only,' he continued, 'which is usual enough in all such cases, and I venture to think is particularly natural in this case. I mean that you have your late rector's good word.'

'Mr. Lindo's good word?' the curate stammered.

'Of course,' the unconscious archdeacon answered.

The curate's jaw dropped; but by an effort he forced a ghastly smile. 'To be sure,' he said. 'There will be no difficulty about that, I think.'

'No,' replied the other, 'for I have just seen him, and can say at once that he is prepared to give it you. He has behaved throughout in a most generous manner, and the consequence is that I have nothing more to do except to offer you my congratulations on your preferment.'

For a moment Clode could scarcely believe in his happiness. In the short space of two minutes he had tasted to the full both the pleasure of hope and the pang of despair. Could it be that all that was over already? That the period of waiting and uncertainty was past and gone? That the prize to which he had looked so long—and with the prize the woman he loved—was his at last?—was actually in his grasp?

His head reeled, great as was his self-control, and a haze rose before his eyes. As this passed away he became conscious that the archdeacon was shaking his hand with great heartiness, and that the thing was real! He was rector, or as good as rector, of Claversham. The object of his ambition

was his! He was happy: perhaps it was the happiest moment of his life. He had even time to wonder whether he could not do Lindo a good turn—whether he could not somehow make it up to him.

‘You are very good,’ he muttered, gratefully pressing the archdeacon’s hand.

‘I am glad it is not a stranger,’ that gentleman replied heartily. ‘Oh,’ he continued, turning suddenly and speaking in a different tone, ‘is that you, Mr. Bonamy? Well, there can be no harm in your hearing the news also. You are people’s warden, of course, and have a kind of claim to hear it early. To be sure you have.’

‘What is the news?’ Mr. Bonamy asked rather shortly. He had risen and drawn near unnoticed, Jack Smith behind him. ‘Do I understand that Lord Dymore has accepted the rector’s resignation?’

‘That is so.’

‘And that he proposes to present Mr. Clode?’ the lawyer continued, looking hard at the curate as he named him.

‘Precisely,’ replied the archdeacon, without hesitation.

‘I hope you have no objection, Mr. Bonamy,’ the curate said, bowing slightly with a gracious air. He could afford to be gracious now. He even felt good—as men in such moments do.

But in the lawyer’s response there was no graciousness, nor much apparent goodness. ‘I am afraid,’ he said, standing up gaunt and stiff, with a

scowl on his face, 'that I must take advantage of that saving clause, Mr. Clode. I am people's warden, as the archdeacon says, and I may not improperly claim to have some interest in this, and frankly I object to your appointment—to your appointment as rector here.'

'You object!' the curate stammered, between wrath and wonder.

'Bless me!' the archdeacon exclaimed in un-mixed astonishment. 'This is quite out of order. What do you mean?'

'Just what I say. I object,' repeated the lawyer firmly. This time Clode said nothing, but his eyes flashed, and he drew himself up, his face dark with passion. 'Shall I state my objection now?' Mr. Bonamy continued, with the utmost gravity. 'It is not quite formal, but—very well, I will do so. I have rather a curious story to tell, and I must go back a short time. When Mr. Lindo's honesty in accepting the living was first called in question about a month ago, he referred to the letters in which Lord Dymore's agents conveyed the offer to him. He had those letters by him. Naturally, he had preserved them with care, and he began to regard them in the light of valuable evidence on his behalf, since they showed the facts brought to his knowledge when he accepted the living. I have said that he had preserved them with care; and, indeed, he is prepared to say to-day, that from the time of his arrival here until now they have never, with his knowledge or consent, passed out of his possession.'

The lawyer's rasping voice ceased for a moment. Stephen Clode's face was a shade paler, but away from the gas-jets this could not be distinguished. He was arming himself to meet whatever shock was to come, while below this voluntary action of the brain his mind ran in an undercurrent of fierce passionate anger against himself—anger that he had ever meddled with those fatal letters. Oh, the folly, the uselessness, the danger of that act, as he saw them now!

'Nevertheless,' Mr Bonamy resumed in the same even, pitiless tone, 'when Mr. Lindo referred to these letters—which he kept, I should add, in a locked cupboard in his library—he found that the first in date, and the most important of them all, had been mutilated.'

The curate's brow cleared. 'What on earth,' he broke out, 'has this to do with me, Mr. Bonamy?' And he laughed—a laugh of relief and triumph. The lawyer's last words had lifted a weight from his heart. They had found a mare's nest after all.

'Quite so!' the archdeacon chimed in with good-natured fussiness. 'What has all this to do with the matter in hand, or with Mr. Clode, Mr. Bonamy? I fail to see.'

'In a moment I will show you,' the lawyer answered. Then he paused, and, taking a letter-case from his pocket, leisurely extracted from it a small piece of paper. 'I will first ask Mr. Clode,' he continued, 'to tell us if he supplied Mr. Lindo with the names of a firm of Birmingham solicitors.'

'Certainly I did,' replied the curate haughtily.

‘And you gave him their address, I think?’

‘I did.’

‘Perhaps you can tell me, then, whether that is the address you wrote for him,’ continued the lawyer smoothly, as he held out the paper for the curate’s inspection.

‘It is,’ Clode answered at once. ‘I wrote it for Mr. Lindo in my own room, and gave it him there. But I fail to see what all this has to do with the point you have raised,’ he continued with considerable heat.

‘It has just this to do with it, Mr. Clode,’ the lawyer answered drily, a twinkle in his eyes—‘that this address is written on the reverse side of the very piece of paper which is missing from Mr. Lindo’s letter—the important letter I have described. And I wish to ask you, and I think it will be to your interest to give as clear an answer to the question as possible, how you came into possession of this scrap of paper.’

The curate glared at his questioner. ‘I do not understand you,’ he stammered. And he held out his hand for the paper.

‘I think you will when you look at both sides of the sheet,’ replied the lawyer, handing it to him. ‘On one side there is the address you wrote. On the other are the last sentence and signature of a letter from Messrs. Gearn & Baker to Mr. Lindo. The question is a very simple one. How did you get possession of this piece of paper?’

Clode was silent—silent, though he knew that the archdeacon was looking at him, and that a

single hearty spontaneous denial might avert suspicion. He stood holding the paper in his hand, and gazing stupidly at the damning words, utterly unable to comprehend for the moment how they came to be there. Little by little, however, as the benumbing effects of the surprise wore off, his thoughts went back to the evening when the address was written, and he remembered how the rector had come in and surprised him, and how he had huddled away the letters. In his disorder, no doubt, he had left one lying among his own papers, and made the fatal mistake of tearing from it the scrap on which he had written the address.

He saw it all as he stood there, still gazing at the piece of paper, while his rugged face grew darkly red and then again a miserable sallow, and the perspiration sprang out upon his forehead. He felt that the archdeacon's eyes were upon him, that the archdeacon was waiting for him to speak. He saw the mistake he had made, but his brain, usually so ready, failed to supply him with the explanation he required.

'You understand?' Mr. Bonamy said slowly. 'The question is, how this letter came to be in your room that evening, Mr. Clode. That is the question.'

'I cannot say,' he answered huskily. He was so shaken by the unexpected nature of the attack, and by the strange and ominous way in which the evidence against him had arisen, that he had not the courage to look up and face his accuser. 'I think—nay, I am sure, indeed—that the rector

must have given me the paper,' he explained, after an awkward pause.

'He is positive he did not,' Mr. Bonamy answered.

Then Clode recovered himself and looked up. After all, it was only his word against another's. 'Possibly he is,' he said, 'and yet he may be mistaken. I cannot otherwise see how the paper could have come into my hands. You do not really mean,' he continued with a smile, which was almost easy, 'to charge me with stealing the letter, I suppose?'

'Well, to be quite candid, I do,' Mr. Bonamy replied curtly. Nor was this unexpected slap in the face rendered more tolerable by the qualification he hastened to add—'or getting it stolen.'

The curate started. 'This is not to be borne,' he cried hotly. He looked at the archdeacon as if expecting him to interfere. But he found that gentlemen's face grave and troubled, and, seeing he must expect no help from him at present, he continued, 'Do you dare to make so serious an accusation on such evidence as this, Mr. Bonamy?'

'On that,' the lawyer replied, pointing to the paper, 'and on other evidence besides.'

The curate flinched. Had they found Felton, the earl's servant? Had they any more scraps of paper—any more self-wrought damning evidence of that kind? It was only by an effort, which was apparent to one at least of his hearers, that he gathered himself together, and answered, with a

show of promptitude and ease, 'Other evidence? What, I ask? Produce it!'

'Here it is,' said Mr. Bonamy, pointing to Jack Smith, who had been standing at his elbow throughout the discussion.

'What has he to do with it?' Clode muttered with dry lips.

'Only this,' the barrister said quietly, addressing himself to the archdeacon, 'that some time ago I saw Mr. Clode replace a packet in the cupboard in the rector's library. He only discovered my presence in the room when the cupboard door was open, and his agitation on observing me struck me as strange. Afterwards I made inquiries of Mr. Lindo, without telling him my reason, and learned that Mr. Clode had no business at that cupboard—which was in fact, devoted to the rector's private papers.'

'Perhaps, Mr. Clode, you will explain that,' said the lawyer with quiet triumph.

He might have denied it had he spoken out at once. He might have given Jack the lie. But he saw with sudden and horrible clearness how this thing fitted that other thing, and this evidence corroborated that; and he lost his presence of mind, and for a moment stood speechless, glaring at his new accuser. He did not need to look at the archdeacon to be sure that his face was no longer grave only, but stern and suspicious. The gas-jets flared before his eyes and dazzled him. The room seemed to be turning. He could not answer. It was only when he had stood for an age, as it seemed to him,

dumb, and self-convicted before those three faces, that he summoned up courage to mutter, 'It is false. It is all false, I say !' and to stamp his foot on the floor.

But no one answered him, and he quailed. His nerves were shaken. He, who on ordinary occasions prided himself on his tact and management, dared not now urge another word in his own defence lest some new piece of evidence should arise to give him the lie. The meaning silence of his accusers and his own conscience were too much for him. And, suddenly snatching up his hat, which lay on a chair beside him, he rushed from the room.

He had not gone fifty yards along the pavement before he recognised the mad folly of this retreat—the utter surrender of all his hopes and ambitions which it meant. But it was too late. The strong man had met a stronger. His very triumph and victory had gone some way towards undoing him, by rendering him more open to surprise and less prepared for sudden attack. Now it was too late to do more than repent. He saw that. Hurrying through the darkness, heedless whither he went, he invented a dozen stories to explain his conduct. But always the archdeacon's grave face rose before him, and he rejected the clever fictions and the sophisms in support of them which his ingenuity was now so quick to suggest.

How he cursed the madness, the insensate folly, which had wrecked him ! Had he only let matters take their own course and stood aside he would have gained his ends ! For a minute and a half he

had been as good as rector of Claversham. And now!

Laura Hammond, crossing the hall after tea, heard the outer door open suddenly behind her, and, feeling the cold gust of air which entered, stopped and turned, and saw him standing on the mat. He had let himself in in this way on more than one occasion before, and it was not that which in a moment caused her heart to sink. She had been expecting him all day, for she knew the crisis was imminent, and had been hourly looking for news. But she had not been expecting him in this guise. There was a strange disorder in his air and manner. He was wet and splashed with mud. He held his hat in his hand, as if he had been walking bareheaded in the rain. His eyes shone with a wild light, and he looked at her oddly. She turned and went towards him. 'Is it you?' she said timidly.

'Oh, yes, it is I,' he answered, with a forced laugh. 'I want to speak to you.' And he let drop the *portièrre*, which he had hitherto held in his hand.

There was a light in the breakfast-room, which opened on the hall, and she led the way into that room. He followed her and closed the door behind him. She pointed to a chair, but he did not take it. 'What is it?' she said, looking up at him in real alarm. 'What is the matter, Stephen?'

'Everything!' he answered, with another laugh. 'I am leaving Claversham.'

'You are leaving?' she said incredulously.

'Yes, leaving!' he answered.

‘To-night?’ she stammered.

‘Well, not to-night,’ he answered, with rude irony. ‘To-morrow. I have been within an ace of getting the living, and I—I have lost it. That is all.’

Her cheek turned a shade paler, and she laid one hand on the table to steady herself. ‘I am so sorry,’ she murmured.

He did not see her tremor; he heard only her words, and he resented them bitterly. ‘Have you nothing more to say than that?’ he cried.

She had much more to say—or, rather, had she said all that was in her mind she would have had. But his tone helped her to recover herself—helped her to play the part on which she had long ago decided. In her way she loved this man, and her will had melted at sight of him standing downcast and defeated before her. Had he attacked her on the side of her affections he might have done much—he might have prevailed. But his hard words recalled her to her natural self. ‘What would you have me say?’ she answered, looking steadily across the table at him. Something, she began to see, had happened besides the loss of the living—something which had hurt him sorely. And as she discerned this, she compared his dishevelled, untidy dress with the luxury of the room, and shivered at the thought of the precipice on the brink of which she had paused.

He did not answer.

‘What would you have me say?’ she repeated more firmly.

‘If you do not know, I cannot teach you,’ he retorted, with a sneer.

‘You have no right to say that,’ she replied bravely. ‘You remember our compact.’

‘You intend to keep to it?’ he asked scornfully.

She had no doubt about that now, and she summoned up her courage by an effort. ‘Certainly I do,’ she murmured. ‘I thought you understood me. I tried to make my meaning clear.’

Clode did not answer her at once. He stood looking at her, his eyes glowing. He knew that his only hope, if hope there might be, lay in gaining some word from her now—now, before any rumour to his disadvantage should get abroad in the town. But his temper, long restrained, was so infuriated by disappointment and defeat, that for the moment love did not prevail with him. He knew that a tender word might do much, but he could not frame it. When he did at last find tongue it was only to say, ‘And that is your final decision?’

‘It is,’ she answered in a low voice. She did not dare to look up at him.

‘And all you have to say to me?’

‘Yes, all. Except that I wish you well. I shall always wish you well, Mr. Clode,’ she muttered.

‘Thank you,’ he answered coldly.

So coldly, and with so much composure, that she did not guess the gust of hatred of all things and all men which was in his heart. He was beside

himself with love, rage, disappointment. For a moment longer he stood gazing at her downcast face. But she did not look up at him; and, presently, in a strange silence, he turned and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV

HUMBLE-PIE

THE success of reticence is great. Mr. Bonamy and his nephew, as they went home to tea after their victory, plumed themselves not a little upon the proof of this which they had just given Mr. Clode. They said little, it is true, even to one another, but more than once Mr. Bonamy chuckled in a particularly dry manner, and at the top of the street Jack made an observation. 'You think the archdeacon was satisfied?' he asked, turning to his companion for a moment.

'Absolutely,' quoth Mr. Bonamy; and he strode on with one hand in his pocket, his coat-tails flying, and his money jingling in a manner inimitable by any other Claversham person.

At tea they were both silent upon the subject, but the lawyer presently let drop the fact that the earl had accepted the rector's resignation. Jack, watchfully jealous, poor fellow, yet in his jealousy loyal to the core, glanced involuntarily at Kate to see what effect the news produced upon her; and then glanced swiftly away again. Not so swiftly, however, that the change in the girl's face escaped

him. He saw it flush with mingled pride and alarm, and then grow grave and thoughtful. After that she kept her eyes averted from him, and he talked busily to Daintry. 'I must be leaving you to-morrow,' he said by-and-by, as they rose from the table.

'You will be coming back again?' Mr. Bonamy answered, interrupting a loud wail from Daintry. It should be explained that Jack had not stayed through the whole of these weeks at Claversham, but had twice left for some days on circuit business. Mr. Bonamy thought he was meditating another of these disappearances.

'I should like to do so,' Jack answered quietly, 'but I must get back to London now.'

'Well, your room will be ready for you whenever you like to come to us,' Mr. Bonamy replied with crabbed graciousness. And he fully meant what he said. He had grown used to Jack's company. He saw, too, the change his presence had made in the girls' lives, and possibly he entertained some thoughts of a greater change which the cousin might make in the life of one of them.

So he was sorry to lose Jack. But Daintry was inconsolable. When she and Kate were alone together she made her moan, sitting in a great chair three sizes too big for her, with her legs sprawling before her, her hands on the chair-arms, and her eyes on the fire. 'Oh, dear, what shall we do when he is gone, Kate?' she said disconsolately. 'Won't it be miserable?'

Kate, who was bending over her work, and had

been unusually silent for some time, looked up with a start and a rush of colour to her cheeks. 'When who is gone—oh, you mean Jack!' she said rather incoherently.

'Of course I do,' Daintry answered crossly. 'But you never did care for Jack.'

'You have no right to say that,' Kate answered quickly, letting her work drop for the moment. 'I think Jack is one of the noblest, the most generous—yes,' she continued quickly, 'the bravest man I have ever known, Daintry.'

Her voice trembled, and Daintry saw with surprise that her eyes were full of tears. 'I never thought you felt like that about him,' the younger girl answered penitently.

'Perhaps I did not a little while back,' Kate answered gently as she took up her work again. 'I know him better now, that is all.'

It was quite true. She knew him better now. A fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind. Love, which blinds our eyes to some things, opens them to others. Had Jack offered Kate 'Their Wedding Journey' now she might still have asked him to change the book for another, but assuredly she would not have told him its title sounded silly, nor hurt his feelings by so much as a look.

It was quite true that she thought him all she said, that her eyes grew moist for his sake. But his was the minute only: the hour was another's. Daintry, proceeding to speculate gloomily on the dulness of Claversham without Jack, thought her sister was attending to her, whereas Kate's thoughts

were far away now, centred on a fair head and a bright boyish face, and a solitary room in which she pictured Reginald Lindo sitting alone and despondent, the short-lived brilliance of his Claversham career already extinguished. What were his thoughts, she wondered. Was he regretting—for the strongest have their hours of weakness—the step he had taken? Was he blaming her for the advice she had given? Was he giving a thought to her at all, or only planning the new life on which he must now enter—forming the new hopes which must henceforth cheer him on?

Kate let her work drop and looked dreamily before her. Assuredly the prospect was a dull and uninviting one. Before *his* coming there had always been the unknown something which a girl's future holds—a possibility of change, of living a happier, fuller life. But now she had nothing of this kind before her. He had come and robbed her even of this, and given her in return only regret and humiliation, and a few—a very few—hours of strange pleasure and sunshine and womanly pride in a woman's influence nobly used. Yet would she have had it otherwise? No, not for all the unknown possibilities of change, not though Claversham life should stretch its dulness unbroken through a century.

She was sitting alone in the dining-room next morning, Mr. Bonamy being at the office, and Daintry out shopping, when the maid came in and announced that Mr. Lindo was at the door and wished to see her. 'Are you sure that he did not

ask for Mr. Bonamy?' Kate said, rising and laying down her work with outward composure and secret agitation.

'No; he asked particularly for you, miss,' the servant answered, standing with her hand on the door.

'Very well; you can show him in here,' Kate replied, casting an eye round her, but disdaining to remove the signs of domestic employment which met its scrutiny. 'He has come to say good-bye,' she thought to herself; and with a little gasp she schooled herself to play her part fitly and close the little drama with decency and reserve.

He came in looking very thoughtful. She need not have feared for her father's papers, her sister's dog's-eared Ollendorf, or her own sewing. He did not so much as glance at them. She thought she saw business in his eye, and she said as he advanced, 'Did you wish to see me or my father, Mr. Lindo?'

'You, Miss Bonamy,' he answered, shaking hands with her. 'You have heard the news, I suppose?'

'Yes,' she replied soberly. 'I am so very sorry. I fear—I mean I regret now, that when you——'

'Asked for advice'—he continued, helping her out with a grave smile. He had taken the great leather-covered easy-chair on the other side of the fireplace, and was sitting forward in it, toying with his hat.

'Yes,' she said, colouring—'if you like to put

it in that very flattering form—I regret now that I presumed to give it, Mr. Lindo.’

‘I am sorry for that,’ he answered, looking up at her as he spoke.

She felt herself colouring anew. ‘Why? she asked rather tremulously.

‘Because I have come to ask your advice again. ‘You will not refuse to give it me?’

She looked at him in surprise; with a little annoyance even. It was absurd. Why should he come to her in this way? Why, because on one occasion, when circumstances had impelled him to speak and her to answer, she had presumed to advise—why should he again come to her of set purpose? It was ridiculous of him. ‘I think I must refuse,’ she said gravely and a little formally. ‘I know nothing of business.’

‘It is not upon a matter of business,’ he answered.

She uttered a sigh of impatience. ‘I think you are very foolish, Mr. Lindo. Why do you not go to my father?’

‘Well, because it is—because it is on a rather delicate matter,’ he answered impulsively.

‘Still, I do not see why you should bring it to me,’ she objected, with a flash in her grey eyes, and many memories in her mind.

‘Well, I will tell you why I bring it to you,’ he answered bluntly. ‘Because I acted on your advice the other day; and that, you see, Miss Bonamy, has put me in this fix; and—and, in fact, made other advice necessary, don’t you see?’

‘I see you are inclined to be somewhat ungenerous,’ she answered. ‘But if it must be so, pray go on.’

He rose slowly and stood leaning against the mantelshelf in his favourite attitude, his foot on the fender. ‘I will be as short as I can,’ he said, a nervousness she did not fail to note in his manner. ‘Perhaps you will kindly hear me to the end before you solve my problem for me. It will help me a little, I think, if I may put my case in the third person. Miss Bonamy’—he paused on the name and cleared his throat, and then went on more quickly—‘a man I know, young and keen, and at the time successful—successful beyond his hopes, so that others of his age and standing looked on him with envy, came one day to know a girl, and, from the moment of knowing her, to admire and esteem her. She was not only very beautiful, but he thought he saw in her, almost from the first hour of their acquaintance, such noble and generous qualities as all men, even the weakest, would fain imagine in the woman they love.’

Kate moved suddenly in her chair as if to rise. Then she sat back again, and he went on.

‘This was a weak man,’ he said in a low voice. ‘He had had small experience; let that be some excuse for him. He was entering at this time on a new field of work, in which he found himself of importance and fancied himself of greater importance. There he had frequent opportunities of meeting the woman I have mentioned, who had already made

an impression on him. But his head was turned. He discovered that for certain small and unworthy reasons her goodness and her fairness were not recognised by those among whom he mixed, and he had the meanness to swim with the current and to strive to think no more of the woman to whom his heart had gone out. He acted like a cur, in fact, and presently he had his reward. Evil times came upon him. The position he loved was threatened. Finally he lost it, and found himself again where he had started in life—a poor curate without influence or brilliant prospects. Then—it seems an ignoble, a mean, and a miserable thing to say—he found out for certain that he loved this woman, and could imagine no greater honour or happiness than to have her for his wife.’

He paused a moment, and stole a glance at her. Kate sat motionless and still, her lips compressed and her eyes hidden by their long lashes, her gaze fixed apparently on the fire. Save that her face was slightly flushed, and that she breathed quickly, he might have fancied that she did not understand, or even that she had not heard. When he spoke again, after waiting anxiously and vainly for any sign, his voice was husky and agitated. ‘Will you tell me, Miss Bonamy, what he should do?’ he said. ‘Should he ask her to forgive him, and to trust him, or should he go away and be silent?’

She did not speak.

‘Kate, will you not tell me? Can I not hope to be forgiven?’ He was stooping beside her now, and his hand almost touched her hair.

Then, at last, she looked up at him. 'Will not my advice come a little late?' she whispered tremulously and yet with a smile—a smile which was at once bright and tearful and eloquent beyond words.

Afterwards she thought of a dozen things she should have said to him—about his certainty of himself, about her father ; but at the time none of these occurred to her. If he had come to her with his hands full, it would certainly have been otherwise. But she saw him poor through his own act, and her pride left her. When he took her in his arms and kissed her, she said not a word. And he said only, 'My darling !'

The rich can afford to be niggardly. Lindo did not stay long, the question he had to put once answered, his claim to happiness once allowed. When Mr. Bonamy came in half an hour later, he found Kate alone. There was an austere elation in his eye which for a moment led her to think that he had heard her news. His first words, however, dispelled the idea. 'I have just seen Lord Dynmore,' he said, taking his coat-skirts on his arms and speaking with a geniality which showed that he was moved out of his everyday self. 'He has—he has considerably surprised me.'

'Indeed ?' said Kate, blushing and conscious, half-attentive and half given up to thinking how she should tell her own tale.

'Yes. He has very much surprised me. He

has asked me to undertake the agency of his property in this part of the country.'

Kate dropped her sewing in genuine surprise. 'No?' she said. 'Has he, indeed?'

Mr. Bonamy, pursing up his lips to keep back the smile of complacency which would force its way, let his eyes rove round the room. 'Yes,' he said, 'I do not mind saying here that I am rather flattered. Of course I should not say as much out of doors.'

'Oh, papa, I am so glad,' she cried, rising. An unwonted softness in her tone touched and pleased him.

'Yes,' he continued, 'I am to go over to the park to-morrow to lunch with him and talk over matters. He told me something else which will astonish you. He has behaved very handsomely to Mr. Lindo. It seems he saw him early this morning, after having an interview with the arch-deacon, and offered him the country living of Pocklington, in Oxfordshire—worth, I believe, about five hundred a year. He is going to give the vicar of Pocklington the rectory here.'

Kate's face was scarlet. 'But I thought—I understood,' she stammered, 'that Mr. Clode was to be rector here?'

'Not at all,' said Mr. Bonamy, with some asperity. 'The whole thing was settled before ten o'clock this morning. Mary told me at the door that Lindo had been here since, so I supposed he had told you something about it.'

'He did not tell me a word of it!' Kate

answered impulsively, the generous trick her lover had played her breaking in upon her mind in all its fulness. 'Not a word of it! But, papa'—with a pause and then a rush of words—'he asked me to be his wife, and I—I told him I would.'

For a moment Mr. Bonamy stared at his daughter as if he thought she had lost her wits. Probably since his boyhood he had never been so much astonished. 'I was talking of Mr. Lindo,' he said at length, speaking with laborious clearness. 'You are referring to your cousin, I fancy.'

'No,' Kate said, striving with her happy confusion. 'I mean Mr. Lindo, papa.'

'Indeed! indeed!' Mr. Bonamy answered after another pause, speaking still more slowly, and gazing at her as if he had never seen her before, nor anything at all like her. 'You have a good deal surprised me. And I am not easily surprised, I think. Not easily, I think.'

'But you are not angry with me, papa?' she murmured rather tearfully.

For a moment he still stared at her in silence, unable to overcome his astonishment. Then by a great effort he recovered himself. 'Oh, no,' he said, with a smack of his old causticity, 'I do not see why I should be angry with you, Kate. Indeed, I may say I foretold this. I always said that young man would introduce great changes, and he has done it. He has fulfilled my words to the letter, my dear!'

CHAPTER XXVI

LOOSE ENDS

DR. GREGG was one of the first persons in the town to hear of the late rector's engagement. His reception of the news was characteristic. 'I don't believe it!' he shrieked. 'I don't believe it! It is all rubbish! What has he got to marry upon, I should like to know?'

His informant ventured to mention the living of Pocklington.

'I don't believe it!' the little doctor shrieked. 'If he had got that he would see her far enough before he would marry her. Do you think I am such a fool as to believe that?'

'But you see, Bonamy—the earl's agency will be rather a lift in the world for him. And he has money.'

'I don't believe it!' shrieked Gregg again.

But, alas! he did. He knew that these things were true, and when he next met Bonamy he smiled a wry smile, and tried to swallow his teeth, and grovelled, still with the native snarl curling his lips at intervals. The doctor, indeed, had to suffer a good deal of unhappiness in these days. Clode,

about whom he had boasted largely, was conspicuous by his absence. Lord Dymore's carriage might be seen any morning in front of the Bonamy offices. And rumour said that the earl had taken a strange fancy to the young clergyman whom he had so belaboured. Things seemed to Gregg and to some other people in Claversham to be horribly out of joint at this time.

Among others, poor Mrs. Hammond found her brain somewhat disordered. To the curate's unaccountable withdrawal, as to the translation of the late rector to Pocklington, she could easily reconcile herself. But to Mr. Lindo's engagement to the lawyer's daughter, and to the surprising intimacy between the earl and Mr. Bonamy, she could not so readily make up her mind. Why, it was reported that the earl had walked into town and taken tea at Mr. Bonamy's house ! Still, facts are stubborn things—it is ill work kicking against them ; nor was it long before Mrs. Hammond was heard to say that the lawyer's conduct in supporting Mr. Lindo in his trouble had produced a very favourable impression on her mind, and prepared her to look upon him in a new light.

And Laura ? Laura, during these changes, showed herself particularly bright and sparkling. She was not of a nature to feel even defeat very deeply, or to philosophise much over past mistakes. Her mother saw no change in her—nay, she marvelled, recalling her daughter's intimacy with Mr. Clode and the obstinacy she had exhibited in siding with him, that Laura could so completely

put him out of her mind and thoughts. But the least sensitive feel sometimes. The most thoughtless have their moments of care. Even the cat, with its love of home and comfort, will sometimes wander on a wet night. And there are times when Laura, doubting the future and weary of the present, wishes she had had the courage to do as her heart bade her, and make the plunge, careless what the world, and her rivals, might say of her marriage to a curate. For Clele's rugged face and masculine will dominate her still. Though a year has elapsed, and she has not heard of him, nor probably will hear of him now, she thinks of him with regret and soreness. She had not much to give, but to her sorrow she knows now that she gave it to him, and that in that struggle for supremacy both were losers.

The good wine last. Kate broke the news to Jack herself, and found it no news. 'Yes, I have just seen Lindo,' he answered quietly, taking her hand, and looking her in the face with dry eyes. 'May he make you very happy, Kate, and—well, I can wish you nothing better than that.' Then Kate broke down and cried bitterly. When she recovered herself Jack was gone.

If you were to describe that scene to Jack Smith's friends in the Temple they would jeer at you. They would cover you with ridicule and gibes. There is no one so keen, so sharp, so matter-of-fact, so certain to succeed as he, they say. They have only one fault to find with him, that he works too hard; that he bids fair to become one of those

legal machines which may be seen any evening taking in fuel at solitary club-tables, and returning afterwards to dusty chambers, with the regularity of clockwork. But there is one thing in his present life which his Temple friends do not know, and which give me hope of him. Week by week there comes to him a letter from the country from a long-limbed girl in short frocks, whose hero he is. Time, which like Procrustes' bed, brings frocks and legs to the same length at last, heals wounds also. When a day not far distant now shall show him Daintry in the bloom of budding womanhood, is it to be thought that Jack will resist her? I think not. But, be that as it may, with no better savour than that of his loyalty, the silent loyalty of an English friend, could the chronicle of a Bayard—much less the tale of a country town—come to an end.

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